

# Chapter One

## *The Inner Journey*

### Perspectives from Psychology and Spirituality

I want to start by speaking about the journey inwards. Throughout this book, I will draw on the perspectives of both psychology and spirituality. I believe it will help us to keep both perspectives in play; it gives us a kind of 'binocular vision' on this journey. Looked at in one way, it is a psychological journey of personal growth. Looked at in another way, it is a journey into greater spiritual depth. Because it is both of these things, we can miss out if we adopt just one perspective and not the other.

In our present situation it is doubly important to use both languages. Neither the language of psychology nor the language of spirituality works for everyone. We live in a fragmented society in which different people look at things from different perspectives; we can no longer rely on a single way of understanding things and expect everyone to understand it.

There has been much interest recently in work on the interface of science and religion, and what I am advocating here is one example of that; but applied specifically to the journey inwards which is, at the same time, both a spiritual and a psychological journey. I am not suggesting that the two perspectives are identical, or that what we take to be spirituality is really nothing more than psychology. I take both perspectives seriously on their own terms. Each can shed light on some aspects of the journey more than others, which is why we need both.

It would be a mistake to think that there is just one perspective from psychology, or just one from spirituality. In fact there are many different approaches within each, and I draw on them freely, in an

eclectic way. The richness and diversity of both psychology and spirituality further help to avoid missing important things.

In my view there is no incompatibility between the two perspectives. Most contemporary psychology simply ignores religion, and is neither for it nor against it. However, many branches of psychology can be applied to understand different aspects of spiritual or religious paths. Some psychologists have been against religion, most notably Sigmund Freud. However, I think that was just a case of his personal opinions influencing his professional work as a psychologist.

Some psychologists have been explicitly interested in making room for a spiritual perspective in psychology. The best umbrella term for that kind of psychology is 'transpersonal psychology', though that includes within it various different approaches. Perhaps the most important contribution of the spiritual perspective to understanding the inner journey is to leave space for more than the human individual.

The psychology of C.G. Jung is one that easily takes a spiritual perspective on board. In fact, much of his psychology could be seen as a translation into psychology of spiritual wisdom. For example, at the heart of his psychology is the 'Self', a kind of higher and complete self, which is also the image of God in the psyche. The journey of 'individuation', in which the Self becomes more of a reality, is both a psychological and a spiritual journey.

Perhaps the most important contribution of psychology to understanding the inner journey is to emphasise that it does not involve everyone conforming to the same template, but rather envisages that each person should realise their own distinctive potential. For many, Jesus plays an important role in this process. He is a model of someone who fulfilled his own potential and destiny, and is available as an inspiration and support for anyone who embarks on this journey of personal transformation for themselves. Being inspired by Jesus and becoming our true selves are not in tension with each other; they turn out to be just different aspects of the same process.

*Question:*

*What way of talking about your inner journey is most helpful for you, and why?*

## Heights and Depths

I want now to develop a fuller argument for why psychology and spirituality need each other when it comes to talking about the inner life.

Notice the different spatial metaphors that they characteristically use. Psychology often talks about going deep, especially with 'depth psychology'. Psychology wants to get to the bottom of things. Religion, in contrast, talks about raising up, or lifting up. At the heart of the Mass, the priest says, 'Lift up your hearts,' and the people reply, 'We lift them up to the Lord.' These seem to be in conflict. Religion is trying to go up and psychology is trying to go down. How can anyone do both?

Actually, I don't think there is ultimately any conflict here. If you go infinitely high and infinitely deep, you seem to end up in the same place, albeit by different routes. Either way, you end up at the ultimate spiritual reality that we call 'God'. It is similar to the way mathematicians say that parallel lines meet at infinity; or (another metaphor), 'all roads lead to Rome'.

There are pitfalls on the journey inwards, and it is easy to make mistakes. For example, someone's journey inwards can really be going rather well. But then they can start to feel pleased at how it is going and their pride spoils everything. It is easy to get so caught up in the journey inwards that you become blind to such traps. Keeping the perspectives of both psychology and spirituality in play reduces the risk of being oblivious to such pitfalls. Having two perspectives gives you a double chance of realising when you are going off track.

There are different hazards in a journey inwards that is entirely framed in terms of religion and ignores the psychological, and one that is entirely framed in terms of psychology and ignores the spiritual. Psychology without spirituality can become bogged down and lose direction and purpose; it can become so introspective that it becomes disconnected from anything around it. Psychology, left to itself, can drown in introspection and egocentricity. Raising your sights and taking a God's eye view of things for a moment can help you take your bearings and recover contact with what is beyond yourself.

There are very different hazards in spirituality without psychology, like the dangers of building on shallow or weak foundations. The resulting building is unstable and unable to withstand adverse

conditions. It is easily blown about by fads and fancies and is particularly vulnerable to self-deception. Without psychology we can easily imagine (or pretend) that we are more spiritual than we actually are. The spiritual path, left to itself, is often tempted to take a shortcut that doesn't quite work and is really just papering over the cracks. It is like covering up unhappiness with what some psychologists call 'manic defence'.

My response to the dilemma of which language to use is to say that we need both. We need psychology to help us to go deep, and we need religion and spirituality to help us to lift our hearts and see the big picture. I believe there is no incompatibility, and that both psychology and religion are better when they have the humility to recognise that they benefit from the other. Then, as St Paul puts it, we can know the 'breadth and length and height and depth' of the love of God (Ephesians 3:18–19). Try emphasising the 'and' in that quote. Making use of both psychology and religion can also bring us to greater heights and depths of self-knowledge.

*Question:*

*In your own inner journey, do you rely more  
on psychology or spirituality?*

*How could you become more balanced?*

## Head and Heart

The journey inwards involves both head and heart, and the two need to work together. Humans, more than any other species, have two modes of cognition popularly known as 'head' and 'heart'. The fact that language is so much more developed in humans than in other species means that we can operate at the level of abstract thought more than any other species. But we have also retained the older (in evolutionary terms) capacity to function more intuitively, without pausing to articulate what we comprehend about our circumstances and what it is best to do.

There is a rough mapping of head on to left brain and of heart on to right brain. Ideas about the two sides of the brain were under a cloud for a while, but they have recently been rehabilitated in a long and brilliant book by Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*. As McGilchrist points out, if you are forced to choose between the

two sides of the brain, it is the left brain, the co-called 'dominant' hemisphere, that you can more easily manage without. With just the right hemisphere, the more intuitive half of the brain, people can cope pretty well with the practical business of living, even if they don't have language. With just the left hemisphere, people can talk, but are so totally devoid of common sense that they simply can't cope with practical living.

The left hemisphere is physically very tightly interconnected and tends to live in its own little world. It tends to optimism and arrogance and assumes it can get everything sorted out. The right hemisphere is better connected to the physical body, relates better to people and to social context. It is more downbeat, more humble about what it doesn't know, more open to mystery, and has a stronger sense of the Other, beyond its own world. McGilchrist's view is that the right brain is better equipped to be the 'Master'; but the left brain, which is a useful 'emissary' or servant, has tended to be assertive and to take over as Master.

McGilchrist thinks this has been pretty disastrous. The second part of his book is a broad, sweeping account of Western intellectual history over the last few hundred years, which he sees as a story of the increasing dominance of the left hemisphere, albeit with some swings back in the other direction, like the Romantic Movement. He identifies various current symptoms of left-brain dominance, like the obsession with computer games and the rise in autistic spectrum disorders.

There are various things that might provide an escape route from this potentially disastrous trend in Western civilisation, like art and religion, but he sees both as having been hijacked by left-brain approaches. They ought to be able to help us to rebalance, and to lead us back to a greater reliance on intuitive wisdom and a greater sense of connectedness. However, in many places, religion and art have been so distorted by the dominance of the left brain that they can no longer do that.

Left-brain religion wants to get everything neatly tied down and specified. So, with religion, it wants to strip away the sense of mystery. It thinks it can know about God and know what a correct religious life consists of. But that is always a distortion of religion. Religion lends itself more naturally to a right-brain approach, with its natural sense of the Other, of connectedness and of humility. Dogmatic, literalist religion looks like a left brain takeover of religion. It has the arrogant precision associated with left-brain thinking.

The best way for humans to connect with God is through the heart. The head has its place in religious life but, when it comes to God, the knowing of the heart is the real thing. There are many witnesses I can call on to support me in this. One is that great Catholic of the nineteenth century, Cardinal Newman, whose motto was '*cor ad cor loquitur*' (heart speaks unto heart). Another is that great mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, who describes the memorable occasion when he experienced the true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not the God of the philosophers and the learned. It was an experience that gave him certitude, feeling, joy and peace.

If we are to talk about the deepest religious experiences (as Pascal and many others have tried to do), there is a sense that we are translating from the original wordless realm in which we felt connection with God to some other language or code that doesn't quite capture the experience. We can talk about it, yes, but in doing so we find we are offering a translation of the original experience, not quite the experience itself.

Even when words are used in religion, they are used differently from how they are used in many other areas of life. They are used rather poetically and with a rich network of associations. One very clear example is the idea of death followed by resurrection, associated with the death of Jesus. The same schema comes up in thinking about baptism, with the laying down of old life and taking up a new one. It comes up again in the experience of rebuilding one's life after some big loss or personal disaster. Language that captures such a network of associations is thick and rich.

It sometimes comes up in public events. The bombing of the cathedral in Coventry and its subsequent rebuilding was explicitly seen in these terms. There was a German bombing raid on Coventry in November 1940 and the cathedral caught fire. They tried to put the fire out, but their efforts failed and they had to retreat and watch it burn. As they watched, the Provost, Dick Howard, had a powerful religious experience. He felt that the cathedral belonged to Christ, not to them; it was the body of Christ that was burning there; Christ was being put to death all over again. However, when Christ is put to death he always rises again, and he felt that the cathedral would rise again, because it belonged to Christ. There was a striking collapse of the difference in time and space between the crucifixion of Jesus on

Golgotha and the burning of Coventry Cathedral. In Dick Howard's mind (or heart) they became virtually the same event. It was a kind of déjà vu experience: 'I've been here before.'

The story of Coventry Cathedral has moved me deeply, as I grew up in war-damaged Coventry and saw a new cathedral being built. The Coventry story is one to which I will return several times in this book.

*Question:*

*Can you sense within yourself the difference between thinking about God with your head and responding to him with your heart?*

### Towards Integration

Spiritual paths have several different facets. They involve what people think, do and feel. Ideas, practices and experiences are all involved. When mistakes are made in how the spiritual life is pursued, tensions are set up between these different facets. When it goes well, these different aspects of personality become increasingly integrated.

One of the striking features of the personal transformation that the spiritual life offers is that the various facets of the spiritual life come into harmony with one another. Thoughts, emotions and actions are aligned and work together harmoniously. Each one supports the others in fruitful mutual reinforcement, without tension or strain. Every element in someone's personality works together in a harmonious and balanced way.

A way of functioning develops that is fulfilling for the individual, and which engages creatively and effectively with what is going on around. The person becomes aligned with whatever is good, true and beautiful. In religious shorthand we might say that it involves our becoming the people God called us to be.

Imagine some iron filings scattered on a sheet of paper; they are disorganised and pointing in many different directions. When a magnet is introduced, the filings quickly organise themselves in a pattern and become co-ordinated. When the spiritual life goes well it produces something similar to that kind of co-ordination. The various elements of a personality start to work together around a spiritual centre. In the psychology of C.G. Jung, the name for that spiritual centre is the 'Self'.

It is useful to distinguish between true and false forms of spiritual transformation. In less satisfactory forms of spiritual transformation, there can be uncomfortable struggles between different parts of the personality. That produces an unstable and often unconvincing attempt at spirituality.

A common problem is that people try too hard to produce the appearance of a deeply spiritual life, but in a way that lacks deep roots and is inherently unstable. An appearance of spiritual depth can be created by trying to control other aspects of personality rather than by transforming them. However, whatever part of the personality has been sidelined can start to reassert itself.

Jesus' story about seed being sown in different kinds of soil is very apposite here (Mark 1–9). Some approaches to the spiritual life are like seed sown on shallow soil with no deep roots. Also relevant is Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in which he promises that the water he will give her will be a 'spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). A deep spirituality is like that inner spring welling up from within.

It is a tricky matter how much self-discipline is helpful in the spiritual life. There is certainly a place for it and we need some disciplined regularity in our spiritual practice. However, being too organised and disciplined about it can lead us astray. In the end we find that we cannot turn ourselves into holy people, but there is a way of opening ourselves to something above and beyond us that will transform us. I like St Augustine's dictum, 'Love God and do what you will'. If our hearts connect with God, and we are coming from the right place, then things start to work out well.

We might draw an analogy with how people play sport. Sometimes people talk about the 'natural' game of tennis, basketball or whatever, in which people surrender themselves and let the game play itself through them, rather than trying too hard to play well. It is very similar to the spiritual experience of 'grace' that is beyond yourself.

You may need to practise hard at tennis, and get pretty good at it, before you can surrender to the game and let the game play itself through you. In the same way, you may need to put time and effort into the spiritual life before you can surrender yourself fully to grace and let grace and spirituality flow through you. But in the end, things work much better, in a way that is more satisfying and more convincing, if you can make the switch to doing things that way.

People sometimes talk about letting prayer flow through them, rather than trying very hard to pray. That is similar to a tennis player playing the natural game of tennis. I think that is what St Paul is referring to when he says ‘we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words’ (Romans 8:26). Prayer is bigger than any one of us. There is a stream of prayer in which we can participate as and when we are able; it is not down to us to do it all.

To come back to where I started this chapter, it is one of the benefits of looking at the inner journey from the perspective of psychology as well as spirituality that it is easier to spot when shallow roots are leading to an imitation of the real thing. If the inner life looks convincing from the perspectives of *both* psychology *and* spirituality it is more likely to be authentic and transformative.

*Question:*

*Have there been moments in your spiritual life when it felt natural to just let your spiritual life happen rather than having to work at it?*

## Bible Study

Read Jesus’ story of the sower who sows seed on different kinds of ground (Mark 4:1–9), and explore that as a metaphor for different ways of going about the spiritual journey. How can you approach your own spiritual life in a way that will be like sowing seed in good soil?

Look also at the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4:7–15), and take that as another metaphor for the spiritual life. What kind of spiritual life would be like that inner spring, ‘gushing up to eternal life’?

Look also at what St Paul says about the Spirit praying within us in Romans 8:26–27.

## Background and Sources

A useful guide to the psychology of spirituality is Larry Culliford (2010) *The Psychology of Spirituality: An Introduction*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers. See also Fraser Watts (2017) *Psychology, Religion and Spirituality*. Cambridge University Press (especially chapter eight on spirituality).

For a classic guide to the journey inwards from the perspective of spiritual practice, see F. C. Happold (1968) *Journey Inwards*. Darton, Longman & Todd.

For a comparable book from the perspective of Jungian psychology see Christopher Bryant (1987) *Journey to the Centre: Explorations in the Realm of the Spirit*. Darton, Longman & Todd.

On heights and depths see the paper on 'peaks and vales' in James Hillman (1979) *Puer Papers*. Spring Publications. On head and heart, see Fraser Watts and Geoff Dumbreck (eds.) *Head and Heart: Perspectives from Religion and Psychology*. John Templeton Press.

I have been much influenced by Stephen Verney's (1995) *Water into Wine: An Introduction to St John's Gospel*. Darton, Longman & Todd. Chapter four on Jesus and the Samaritan woman is especially relevant to the suggested Bible study.

There is a helpful mapping between psychological and theological approaches to personality in Peter Morea (1997) *In Search of Personality: Christians and Modern Psychology*. SCM Press.