

Foreword

Many people these days are interested in following a spiritual path of some kind. This book is for such people.

My own background is in the Christian tradition, and I draw on that here. However, I want this book to be useful both to those who identify themselves as Christians, and to those who are merely interested in the Christian path amongst others. I have tried to write in a way that does not presuppose any religious beliefs or commitments. I hope this book will be read, not only by Christians, but by people who adhere to other faith traditions such as Buddhism, people interested in 'new age', people practising mindfulness, and by many others.

Throughout this book, I have kept psychology in play as a partner in the dialogue. That opens up space and avoids religion taking over, as religion tends to do. I increasingly feel that religion needs to be in dialogue with some other perspective. If religion has the stage to itself, it tends to become over-dogmatic, and then it goes bad.

This is another way of recognising a point that has often been made in more traditional language, that 'spiritual pride' is one of the worst 'sins' and that, when religious people become arrogant and closed-minded, the good in what they are trying to do becomes corrupted. Religion seems to need a larger context, and then it can be marvellously life-giving. I think Jesus was making a similar point when he said that the kingdom of Heaven is like yeast (Matthew 13:33).

There are various possible conversation partners for religion and spirituality (such as science or poetry), but I think there is a special place for psychology. Some years ago I was approached by a retired businessman, John Marks, who wanted to bring Christianity and psychology closer together, and sought my help with that. *Living Deeply* is a long-term offshoot of our collaboration. John's infectious enthusiasm made him very lovable, and I am pleased to dedicate this book to him.

John's reason for wanting to bring Christianity and psychology together was simple and compelling. As he saw it, Christianity is about personal transformation; and psychology is the discipline devoted to understanding how people change. So, if Christianity is to help people to actually change, it needs the perspective of psychology to help it to do that more effectively. I agreed with John about that, and still do.

It is worth noting here that psychology and Christianity are playing different roles. Christianity, like any other spiritual approach, has a distinct point of view. It has a particular framework for understanding things, specific objectives, and a distinct set of practices designed to bring them about. Psychology is more general. It takes an overall view of how people function, why they behave as they do, how they change etc. It is an overall approach that can be applied to anything concerning people, including Christianity and other spiritual paths.

In chapter one I focus on the inner journey, a journey that is partly spiritual and partly psychological. Neither approach captures the journey adequately, but together they reflect its richness and complexity, more than either approach can do alone. Psychology can provide a neutral and more accessible language for talking about what are essentially spiritual matters. I would not want to say that religion can be translated entirely into psychology, but it often helps to put spiritual things in psychological terms, where that is possible. Over the last hundred years there has been an astonishing growth in familiarity with psychology, and a corresponding decline in familiarity with religion, so psychology has now become the more accessible language.

The general direction of travel in this book is from the psychological to the religious. I deliberately start from psychology, because it is the more accessible approach. However, as the book goes on, I make increasing use of religious perspectives and go deeper into spirituality.

Section One starts from psychology and deals with various important personal issues, such as coping with stress. Depression is particularly interesting because all areas of human life are affected. Spiritual aspects are important too, and they have often been neglected. Loss is something that everyone has to cope with at some time or other, and it is an issue that Christianity has a lot to say about. Finally, in this section, I look at the twin themes of suffering and wholeness. Again, I draw on psychology as I explore how people find meaning in suffering, how they can find healing, and what 'wholeness' means in practice.

In each case, spiritual practices can make a useful contribution to coping, and I conclude each chapter with a spiritual perspective after first taking a broader look at coping strategies. My general claim is that spiritual approaches to coping can go beyond other coping approaches. They add something distinctive and are not just more of the same.

Then in Section Two I broaden out to look at the relational and social context. We live in an age in which people tend to exaggerate the extent to which people are 'individuals'. I emphasise here the extent to which relationships are a crucial part of every human life. They are not an 'add-on', but fundamental. And it is not only one-to-one relationships that are important; the sense of being part of a community is important too. Some people think that psychology is purely individualistic, but it includes a social perspective and recognises the importance of relationships and community.

Again there are important religious angles. Forgiveness is probably the most important religious approach to sorting out tangled relationships and can make an important contribution, both to one-to-one relationships and to relationships between groups and nations. Forgiveness occupies an interesting place in the interface between psychology and religion. Its origins are in religion but it has recently migrated across into psychology (rather like mindfulness) and become secularised. There are thus both psychological and religious approaches to forgiveness and they have different emphases, which are interesting to compare.

Section Three draws more fully on religion and spirituality. I start with various reasons, both intuitive and scientific, for thinking that there is something more than the apparently material world that we see around us, and begin to explore what is involved in thinking of

that something more as God. I focus then on a particularly important issue in how people understand both themselves and religious traditions such as Christianity, i.e. darkness and light.

Most things in life are both good and bad, and have both light and dark elements that are intertwined. That is sometimes hard for us to cope with; we tend to lapse into 'splitting', seeing some things as entirely good and others as entirely bad. That is often a problem in how we see ourselves and others. It is also an important issue in religious thinking. In fact I increasingly feel that the most important difference between healthy and unhealthy forms of religion is whether they recognise that good and evil are intertwined. Religious thinking is most dangerous when it fails to recognise that.

The next two chapters are the most explicitly Christian, and I turn to focus on Jesus. Despite increasing scepticism about 'God', most people continue to have a very positive view of Jesus, though people's understanding of him is, to my mind, often too much influenced by what church people think, rather than by the historical records in the New Testament and elsewhere. I try to focus down on what Jesus actually said and did. When it comes to making claims about Jesus, I put the emphasis on what he accomplished rather than who and what he was; and I argue that in doing so I am being faithful to the New Testament.

Then I consider traditional ideas about 'sin' and 'salvation', and explore what they mean at a human level, making use of ideas drawn from psychology. Christians have always allowed various different ideas about what Jesus accomplished to run side by side, and I try to introduce some new ideas into the discussion drawing, for example, ideas from photosynthesis and family systems. I take a strong view of the importance of Jesus for the future course of the whole of humanity, not just for 'believers'.

Finally, I talk explicitly about God. I am aware that the idea of 'God' is now often a stumbling block to people following a religious path, though often people struggle over a concept of God that is not necessarily held by religiously committed people. The solution seems to me to focus on the reality of God, as God is actually experienced, and to rise above words and concepts that are necessarily limited, and sometimes misleading. In this section I also try to tackle the complex relationship between God and ourselves. As I see it, there are two opposing pitfalls to be avoided here. One is that God is nothing more

than ourselves; the other is that there is necessarily an opposition between God and ourselves. The middle path recognises the close connection between God and what is best in ourselves, but doesn't identify that with God entirely.

The first two sections of the book are closely connected with the first two modules of the film clips of *Living Deeply* that are available for free computer download (from the Cambridge Institute for Applied Psychology and Religion), though they develop the material beyond what is available on those films. The third module in the film clips, which is more spiritual and religious, is scattered around here. One session, 'Suffering and Wholeness', is now to be found at the end of Section One. The other two sessions of module three of the film clips are at the end of Section Three of this book, and follow three entirely new chapters.

Some readers will want to know how the material here relates to the Bible, which is a touchstone of Christian wisdom. The ideas presented in this book have been developed through a dialogue between psychology and religion in which the Bible has played a crucial role. I have indicated some of the key connections in the text, but at the end of every chapter I have included a special section of Bible passages suggested for study.

The Old Testament includes many key stories in which much human life is to be seen in all its richness and complexity. They don't deal explicitly with psychological ideas, but they describe events in human lives that are of much psychological interest. One of the best examples is the story of Joseph. My colleague, Sara Savage, has written a book about the story of Joseph^[1] that explicitly connects with many of the topics covered in Sections One and Two of this book, drawing on material in an earlier form of *Living Deeply* known as the 'Beta Course'. I recommend her book very enthusiastically. She covers the topics in a slightly different order from how they appear here, but that is dictated by the series of events in the story of Joseph.

I hope that many readers will want to think over how the material here relates to themselves and the personal issues they face. I have provided a question for discussion at the end of each section to help with that. If you read this book in a group of other people, those questions would provide a basis for group discussion.

1. Sara Savage (2011) *Joseph: Insights for the Spiritual Journey*. SPCK.

Some readers will want to go more deeply into the material here, and at the end of each chapter I have also provided some guidance where to go for that. It is also an opportunity to give an indication of some of the material on which I have drawn. I have generally tried to avoid the academic habit of constantly referencing my sources. However, there is a strong basis in scholarship for most of the material presented here, even though I have sometimes been path-breaking in the way I have linked up psychology and spirituality. There are two books of my own that connect with this book at many points and may be useful companions. One, written with colleagues, is about the contribution of psychology to Christian ministry.^[1] The other, my most recent book, is an overview of what psychology has to say about religion and spirituality.^[2]

Naturally, I hope that people will find this book interesting. Words convey ideas, so writing a book necessarily engages at the level of ideas. But there is more to life than words and ideas. Though they are necessarily the vehicle of my engagement with my readers, I hope for a broader engagement. My hope is that this book will affect what people do and what they experience, as well as what they think. Indeed, my immodest ambition is that people will be changed by reading this book.

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1. Fraser Watts, Rebecca Nye and Sara Savage (2002) *Psychology for Christian Ministry*. Routledge.
 2. Fraser Watts (2017) *Psychology, Religion and Spirituality*. Cambridge University Press.