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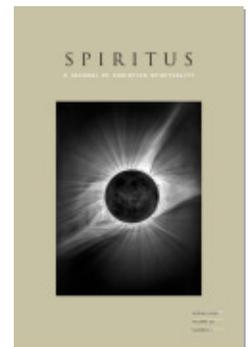
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*Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality: Concepts and Applications* by Fraser Watts (review)

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality: Concepts and Applications.* By Fraser Watts. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2017. 211pp. \$29.99

Fraser Watts' *Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality* is an introduction to the psychology of religion written in a crisp, clear style. Whenever jargon is introduced, Watts offers a layperson's paraphrases; he assumes nothing of his reader but curiosity. Addressing his work to both researchers in the field of psychology of religion and to those involved in parish ministry, Watts presents a great deal of information in well-organized chapters, each of which concludes with a summary of salient claims. Watts conveys a great deal of complex material concisely, so that the breadth of material offered the reader in fewer than two hundred pages never overwhelms, and this reviewer, at least, felt considerably and swiftly smarter with the reading of each subsequent chapter.

Although his book serves as a sampler of issues related to the psychology of religion, Watts reveals—by referring to it often—his approval of the Interacting Cognitive Subsystems model proposed by Philip Barnard to explain what happens to a person involved in religious activity. A theory that could be useful to scholars in the area of Christian spirituality, ICS presents a model of “cognitive architecture,” clarifying how we use two systems: one implicational (or intuitive), with which we experience, and one propositional, with which we make sense of experience. Watts convincingly uses this model to explain a host of religious behaviors, attitudes, and practices, the latter of which, he claims, are often designed to mute the propositional subsystem and allow the implication subsystem fuller scope for activity. Watts's work is essentially evaluative and he does not hide his own biases, indicating the fecundity and the limitations of various models, theories, and typologies, and designating which have potential for future researchers and which will fall—or are falling—by the wayside. The book operates within a Christian perspective, in that the field of psychology of religion has predominantly grown up in a western, Christianized context. When Watts touches upon Buddhist or Islamic religious practice or doctrine, he does so cautiously, encouraging studies in these areas.

Watts clearly desires to make psychology useful for Christians, especially those involved in pastoral ministry. The book is thus constructed in a way that its final chapters on application form a climax to which the book has been building. Its first chapters examine how various sub-disciplines in psychology answer the question of why humans are religious in the first place. Chapters then focus on fundamental aspects of religion, such as experience, practice, and belief. The second half of the book zeroes in on aspects of human psychology and development, and theological applications of psychology to religion, including scriptural interpretation and doctrines like theological anthropology. Of particular interest to those formed for ministry and for scholarship in the area of Christian spirituality will be chapters on “Religious Practice” and “Personal Transformation.” In the chapter on “Religious Practice” Watts explains what happens to a person engaged in religious practice from a psychological perspective. He briefly surveys six practices that currently dominate the field of psychological research: prayer, ritual, confession, glossolalia, spiritual healing, and serpent handling. Later, in the chapter on “Personal Transformation,” drawing together theory and practice, Watts claims, “A psychological understanding of the processes of meaning making and reframing that are involved in some traditional aspects of prayer . . . could contribute significantly to practical

guidance in such prayer” (154). Watts believes that raising into awareness what happens to a person psychologically while engaged in religious practice or experiencing personal transformation should enable pastoral ministers and faith communities to more practically guide and respond to parishioners’ spiritual problems and needs, especially if such ministers and communities “used spiritual and psychological resources in conjunction with one another and did so confidently and skillfully” (156). This, then, is the kernel of Watts’s intention with the book: to draw psychological and formational interests together on behalf of faith communities and believers. Religious people have nothing to fear from psychology, and psychology cannot be expected to explain everything that religious people experience, though what it can explain is valuable.

What, specifically, then of spirituality? The index cites a range of issues, from Buddhism to the transcendent, to which spirituality corresponds. However, given that the book’s conceptual sections each contain three chapters and the book has introductory and concluding chapters, the central chapter on spirituality (chapter eight of fifteen) appears an afterthought, plugged in somehow to tie up loose threads related to issues seemingly beyond religion. Although the book is certain to be useful to its intended audiences, as well as to scholars of Christian spirituality, inclusion of “spirituality” in the book’s title is nevertheless disingenuous. In his first chapter in which Watts offers definitions of religion and psychology, a single paragraph appears on spirituality offering very little information. As Watts notes, “Spirituality is notoriously difficult to define.” While granted, Watts does not provide a definition, pointing out that its problem is that it is, like religion, “multi-faceted” (3). This is not very helpful. However, to be fair to Watts, he recognizes with approval the emerging field of the psychology of spirituality; there simply is not yet enough research or data in this field from which to draw expansively for his volume. His cursory engagement with spirituality is unfortunate because Watts seems poised to contribute something quite useful to spirituality studies. And, indeed, in a way, he does. Not only does he raise questions for the reader watching for spirituality in the book as to what “spirituality” really is—is it implicitly there, though unnamed, in his descriptions of intrinsic religiosity?—Watts also takes his curious reader on a stroll through the recent history of psychology of religion, indicating where theories have been debunked or challenged and providing useful terminology and typologies for non-specialists. The work Watts has done to bring together important issues in the field of psychology of religion provides a resource for spirituality scholars to check in with current trends, and from which—by means of the book’s excellent bibliography—to explore further.

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