

## Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality

*Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality* provides readers with a critical overview of what psychology tells us about religion and spirituality. It is concise without being simplistic, and the first such broad overview to be published for some years. Fraser Watts recognizes that “religion” is complex and multi-faceted, taking different forms in different people and contexts. The book presents a broad view of psychology; whatever kind of psychology you are interested in, you will find it covered here, from biological to social, and from experimental to psychoanalytic. It focuses particularly on the varied concepts that psychologists have employed to make sense of religion and subjects them to critical examination. The book is also concerned with practical applications so the book will help those engaged in religious ministry. It will be of interest to undergraduates and general readers, as well as specialists in religious studies, psychology, and philosophy of religion.

Fraser Watts has combined a distinguished career as a psychologist with a distinguished record in theology and religious studies. For almost twenty years at Cambridge, he led one of the largest research groups in psychology and religion. He received the APA William Bier Award and founded the Cambridge Institute for Applied Psychology and Religion.

## Cambridge Studies in Religion, Philosophy, and Society

*Series Editors*

PAUL MOSER, *Loyola University Chicago*  
CHAD MEISTER, *Bethel College*

This is a series of interdisciplinary texts devoted to major-level courses in religion, philosophy, and related fields. It includes original, current, and wide-spanning contributions by leading scholars from various disciplines that (a) focus on the central academic topics in religion and philosophy; (b) are seminal and up to date regarding recent developments in scholarship on the various key topics; and (c) incorporate, with needed precision and depth, the major differing perspectives and backgrounds – the central voices on the major religions and the religious, philosophical, and sociological viewpoints that cover the intellectual landscape today. Cambridge Studies in Religion, Philosophy, and Society is a direct response to this recent and widespread interest and need.

### Recent Books in the Series

Roger Trigg *Religious Diversity: Philosophical and Political Dimensions*

John Cottingham *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach*

William J. Wainwright *Reason, Revelation, and Devotion: Inference and Argument in Religion*

Harry J. Gensler *Ethics and Religion*

# Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality

## *Concepts and Applications*

FRASER WATTS



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107044449](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107044449)

10.1017/9781107360549

© Fraser Watts 2017

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2017

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-1-107-04444-9 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-63056-7 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

To  
*Léon Turner and Sara Savage*  
*Friends and colleagues from the*  
*Psychology and Religion Research Group at Cambridge*

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
1 Concepts and Approaches	i
2 Psychoanalysis	13
3 Genetics and Evolution	25
4 Brain and Cognition	39
5 Religious Experience	52
6 Religious Practices	64
7 Religious Beliefs and Thinking	82
8 Spirituality	94
9 Developmental Aspects	107
10 Varieties and Types	121
11 Health and Adjustment	136
12 Personal Transformation	149
13 Scripture and Doctrine	160
14 Human Nature and Personality	172
15 Summing-Up	185
<i>Further Reading</i>	189
<i>References</i>	191
<i>Index</i>	205

## Preface

I hope that this book does what any survey of the psychology of religion and spirituality needs to do, and gives an overview of what psychology can tell us about them. I believe it does that in a reliable and up-to-date way, and does it concisely and fairly comprehensively. I have tried to write in a way that assumes no background in psychology and will be accessible to theologians, philosophers, sociologists, church leaders, and the general public.

I have not tried to give a reference to scientific research for every factual claim made here; that would have turned it into a different kind of book. However, I hope that every factual claim made here is one that could be substantiated in that way; there are always references to good secondary sources that go into particular research studies in more detail than is possible here. Where I have speculated, I have tried to make clear that is what I am doing, and I have only offered speculations in which I have a reasonable amount of confidence.

“Religion” and “spirituality” are related and overlapping topics, and I welcome and endorse the recent trend to extend the psychology of religion to include the psychology of spirituality as well. So far, there is less psychological research on spirituality than on religion, but that is rapidly changing. Though I have tried to summarize what psychology can tell us about religion and spirituality, I have tried to do more than that. To be specific, I have tried to do three additional things.

First, I have tried to offer a critical appraisal of current psychology of religion, and to indicate what current lines of enquiry seem to me to be most promising to pursue in the coming period. I believe that several potentially important topics are not currently receiving the attention

they deserve. I have tried, to some extent, to stand outside the current preoccupations of people working in the field, and to ask what would most interest people not working in the field.

Second, I have tried to attend to conceptual issues. These are hugely important in every academic discipline but are often ignored. They are certainly important in the psychology of religion. My intention here is to move to-and-fro between conceptual and empirical material, showing how there can be fruitful interplay between the two. I subscribe to the view of philosophy that sees it as a second-order discipline that does its best work not when it is going it alone, but when it is attending to the conceptual issues in other disciplines, such as the psychology of religion. Much can be learned about religion from attending to conceptual issues and distinctions.

Third, I have also tried to keep in mind what religious people themselves (“insiders”) think about their experiences, beliefs, and practices, and to bring that into dialogue with what psychology has to say from the perspective of “outsiders.” I believe there can be mutual enrichment between those two perspectives. Psychologists can learn from the perspective of religious people, even though they will not regard it as the last word and will want to make their own investigations. In the other direction, religious people can benefit from a psychological perspective on religion. I suggest that is, for the most part, perfectly compatible with a participant’s perspective and provides a complementary viewpoint. It broadens the psychology of religion to become “psychology *and* religion.” I admit to a Christian bias in the way I have approached the psychology of religion, but that reflects the bias of most of the available research, and the fact that most psychology of religion is carried out in predominantly Christian countries.

My broad assessment from taking stock of the work on the interface of psychology and religion, as I have done in writing this book, is that the field is good heart. It has been gathering strength and momentum in recent decades and is now going through one of its stronger periods. I have enjoyed writing this overview of where the field has gotten to, and I hope that readers enjoy it too.

I benefited enormously in writing this book from almost twenty years of teaching and research on psychology and religion at the University of Cambridge, and I have dedicated this book to two of my close colleagues from the Psychology and Religion Research Group (PRRG), Léon Turner and Sara Savage. I owe a lot to them and to many others including Nick Gibson, Alastair Lockhart, Ryan Williams, Liz Gulliford, and Miguel



*Preface*

xi

Farias. Some of the work we did together is now being continued through the Cambridge Institute for Applied Psychology and Religion. I am also grateful to successive year-groups of very bright undergraduates at Cambridge to whom I tried to teach psychology and religion and who were a constant challenge to clarify my own thinking.