

## Questions of religion...

Jesse Bering is Director of the Institute of Cognition and Culture and a Reader in the School of History and Anthropology at Queen's University Belfast, but his work has become well known far and wide. A range of ingenious experiments has made him famous among the growing number of scientists from different fields and nations jointly exploring the roots, functions and evolutionary history of human religiousness, defined as the partially heritable ability to hold beliefs in superempirical agents, such as ancestors, spirits or gods.

For example, Bering and colleagues recorded the behaviours of children who were alone in a room with an incentive to cheat – and with fresh stories about a purportedly present, friendly and invisible 'Princess Alice'. His recordings confirmed that narratives about superempirical agents were actually able to affect decisions as soon as the children felt observed by one.

In another experiment, children from secular and religious kindergartens saw a stage performance about a little puppet mouse, which was devoured by a puppet crocodile. In follow-up interviews, the children were asked about various states of the poor mouse. Although most of them – including the very young – readily acknowledged the cessation of brain and body functions in the dead mouse (such as 'No, he is no longer hungry.'). Most still intuitively attributed mental states (such as 'He sure is homesick!'). Bering concludes that in contrast to popular assumptions, religious families and institutions don't 'instil' these narratives into the children's heads, they just try to hold and shape them into official, religious mythologies.

In a third line of contemporary studies, Bering and his colleagues found that even outspoken atheists tended to ascribe higher meanings to life events in narrative situations, frequently giving answers such as 'I think this job loss happened to teach me what's really important in life.'

In *The God Instinct*, Bering condenses his findings and those of some colleagues into an evolutionary picture of religiousness. According to him, the combination of our propensities to overdetect agency, our readiness to use theory of mind on real or perceived agency and the importance of social reputation and narratives for human cooperation and reproduction resulted in the emergence of the human universal trait we now call 'religion' – mythological traditions about superempirical agents observing and judging our behaviours as well as handing out blessings and punishments. And as people who were more religious tended to inherit communally approved rules and sets of specific successful cultural traditions (such as narratives about God commanding 'Be fruitful and multiply!'), the trait became increasingly advantageous in evolutionary terms. Actually, Bering's thesis about the evolution of

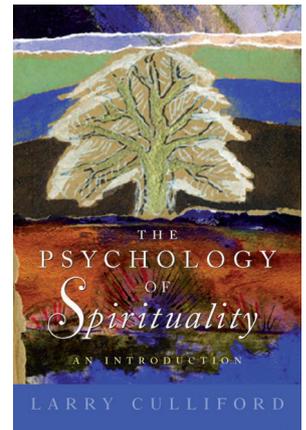
religion built on psychological studies and an increasing body of empirical data comes out as a very close match to the one sketched by Charles Darwin in his *Descent of Man* from 1871, which has been unjustly ignored throughout the sciences for more than a century.

But surprisingly, *The God Instinct* doesn't stop with presenting a captivating scientific thesis and supporting findings. Instead, the author gives insights into his biographic journey and personal struggles. A professing atheist and open about his homosexuality, Bering's critical interest in the matter is deeply personal too, and he writes vividly about his struggle to cope with the 'naturalness' of superempirical beliefs and the evolutionary importance of reproductive success. He has never been a religious person himself, but his scientific curiosity has proved stronger than any tendency to adopt the widespread attitudes of just ignoring or ridiculing other people's 'odd' behaviours. Therefore, *The God Instinct* is not only a book about sound empirical works in a subject of high importance, it is also a book about the psychological tasks we have to accomplish within ourselves when we try to cope with surprising, and sometimes disconcerting, scientific findings.

There's also a good dose of existential wisdom to be found in these pages, expressed through humour and discussions of philosophy, especially of Sartre. In a nutshell, *The God Instinct* is not only valuable for any reader interested in the freshly blooming field of evolutionary studies of religion, it is at least as valuable to all of us who are interested in the effects and troubles empirical sciences are exerting on our minds and worldviews – because none of us is as neutral about those questions that matter as we so often pretend to be.

| Nicholas Brealey Publishing; 2010; Hb £9.95

Reviewed by Michael Blume who teaches the scientific study of religion at the Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena, Germany



### ... and of spirituality

The Psychology of Spirituality: An Introduction  
Larry Culliford

Larry Culliford contends that spiritual experiences (not to be confused with religious experiences) are an important aspect of the human condition, long neglected by psychology.

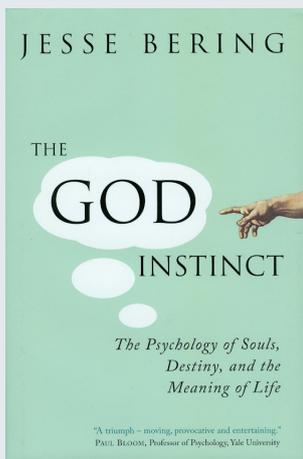
He has an engaging writing style. He constructs his points well, argues convincingly and provides elegant exemplars in the form of vignettes, personal experiences, opinions and even, if we're lucky, references to psychological research! He ends each chapter with a summary of the take-home message and some questions to consider, to further consolidate the message.

But there are flaws. Culliford seems to miss some obvious references. Most obviously for example, he talks at length about the effects of spiritual belief in (potentially) polarising groups, without any reference to the vast body of psychological literature on the nature of intergroup behaviour.

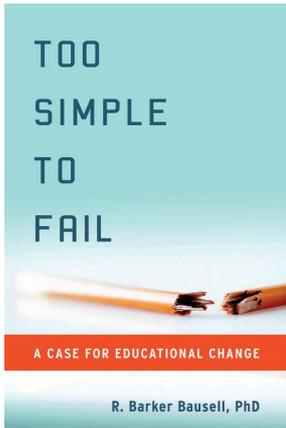
It's a well-written book, with a clear argument, that doesn't claim to be a comprehensive guide to the spirituality of psychology. It is a little evidence-shy at times, but if it provides a foundation to build upon then it will have had a noteworthy impact upon the discipline.

| Jessica Kingsley; 2011; Pb £14.99

Reviewed by Bryn Coles who is a Research Associate in the Division of Health Research, Lancaster University



The God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life  
Jesse Bering



### Too simple to succeed

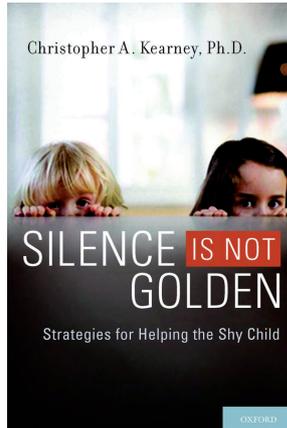
**Too Simple to Fail: A Case for Educational Change**  
R. Barker Bausell

This is a highly personal exposition of a theory for transforming the education system to remove inequalities so that all children will learn. Bausell discusses difficulties in reducing differences in teachers' efficacy and in home support. The central concept is to increase learning by increasing the amount of relevant instructional time delivered. The fundamentals for this are one-to-one tutoring and highly specific curriculum objectives.

Bausell posits that it is exceedingly difficult to improve learning in a typical classroom setting and therefore addresses the setting directly. He provides a glimpse of his future where children are tutored in computer laboratories with a teacher overseeing them on a bank of computer screens.

The value of this book is in the challenge it presents to the current educational system and the reinforcement of concepts such as teaching based on students' current knowledge and teaching to mastery. However the theory is insufficiently explored to be usefully persuasive. For me as an educational and child psychologist, the lack of acknowledgement of the emotional and social aspects of learning is frankly unforgivable.

**Oxford University Press; 2011; Hb £14.99**  
**Reviewed by Angie Wigford**  
*who is an Educational and Child Psychologist with Rhondda Cynon Taf Council*



### An offer of hope

**Silence Is Not Golden: Strategies for Helping the Shy Child**  
Christopher A. Kearney

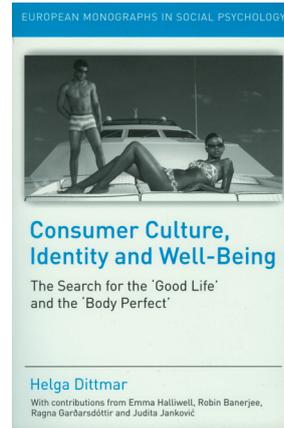
A thoughtful book exploring the extremes, functions and factors of children's shyness. Through a conversational approach, mainly aimed at parents, the author offers strategies, exercises and techniques to help address shyness.

Kearney carefully addresses any feelings of blame and/or guilt experienced by a parent whilst also providing a strong sense of acceptance and hope. Case studies and exercises throughout emphasise key points, clarify and simplify the more complex issues and provide space for reflection.

Kearney emphasises throughout the importance of developing strong parent-school relationships, providing a whole-family approach and collaborative working with the shy child. The inclusion of all of these elements adds to the impact of this book. I did wonder whether parents using it as a guide might feel slightly overwhelmed or underestimate the time, effort and personal and emotional resources required to see effective changes. But this was an enjoyable read offering validation, normalisation and most importantly hope.

A valuable contribution to the parent and professional bookshelf!

**Oxford University Press; 2011; Pb £11.99**  
**Reviewed by Hannah Butler**  
*who is a trainee clinical psychologist, University of Manchester*



### Familiar observations

**Consumer Culture, Identity and Well-being**  
Helga Dittmar

The central message of this study of consumer culture, identity and well-being can be summed up in the simple phrase 'Money cannot buy us happiness'. It's not exactly an earth-shattering revelation, and this is the main problem with the book. We've heard this argument before.

Although the author and her contributors write commandingly and offer a well-structured, well-presented analysis of the existing studies and illustrate quite succinctly the maladaptive consequences of a society and its individuals who equate material success with self-worth, I doubt there are many people unfamiliar with the observations that advertisers exploit our insecurities to sell products, that celebrities like David Beckham influence what we buy, or that women develop body image disturbances upon seeing thin models. Especially in

this debt-ridden era and post-consumer age, many are already counting the personal and financial cost of a decade of easy credit and retail therapy.

While I do agree that material success and personal worth are not automatically linked, a more illuminating analysis would be to look at the underlying psychological traits that make us so susceptible to consumerism, such as peer pressure and in-group membership, the biological basis for compulsive spending (homeostasis and hedonism and self-medication), human competitiveness and the emergence of an aspirational meritocracy within a rigid class-based social hierarchy and how these tendencies are exploited by advertisers. This said, for those unfamiliar with these themes, this book is a good start.

**Psychology Press; 2011; Pb £19.95**  
**Reviewed by Kristina Downing-Orr**  
*who is a clinical psychologist in London*

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