



Spiritual Wounds and Spiritual Dimensions in the Counselling Room

The Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church understands itself as one, universal church, a single global body.

It is held together by:

- The Pope as central authority
- A shared teaching authority (Magisterium)
- Common sacraments
- A largely unified doctrine and theology



Franciscans
(simplicity, care
for the poor)



Dominicans
(teaching
and preaching)



Jesuits
(education,
discernment,
mission)



Benedictines
(prayer, rhythm
of life)



These are not denominations — more like different spiritual “families” within one Church.

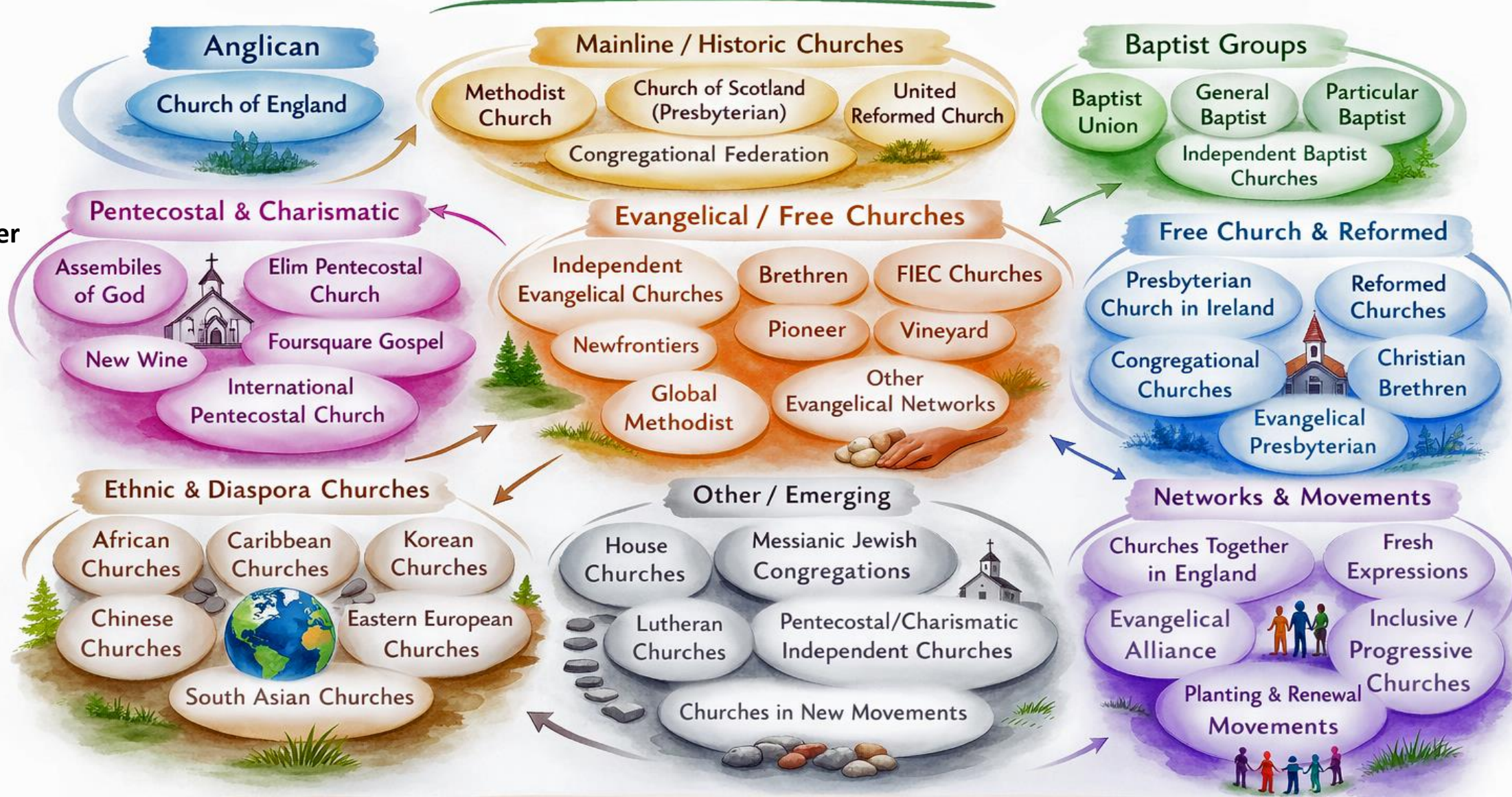
Wherever you go in the world, a Catholic Mass will feel recognisably the same.

Protestant Denominations in the UK

1534 Act of Supremacy



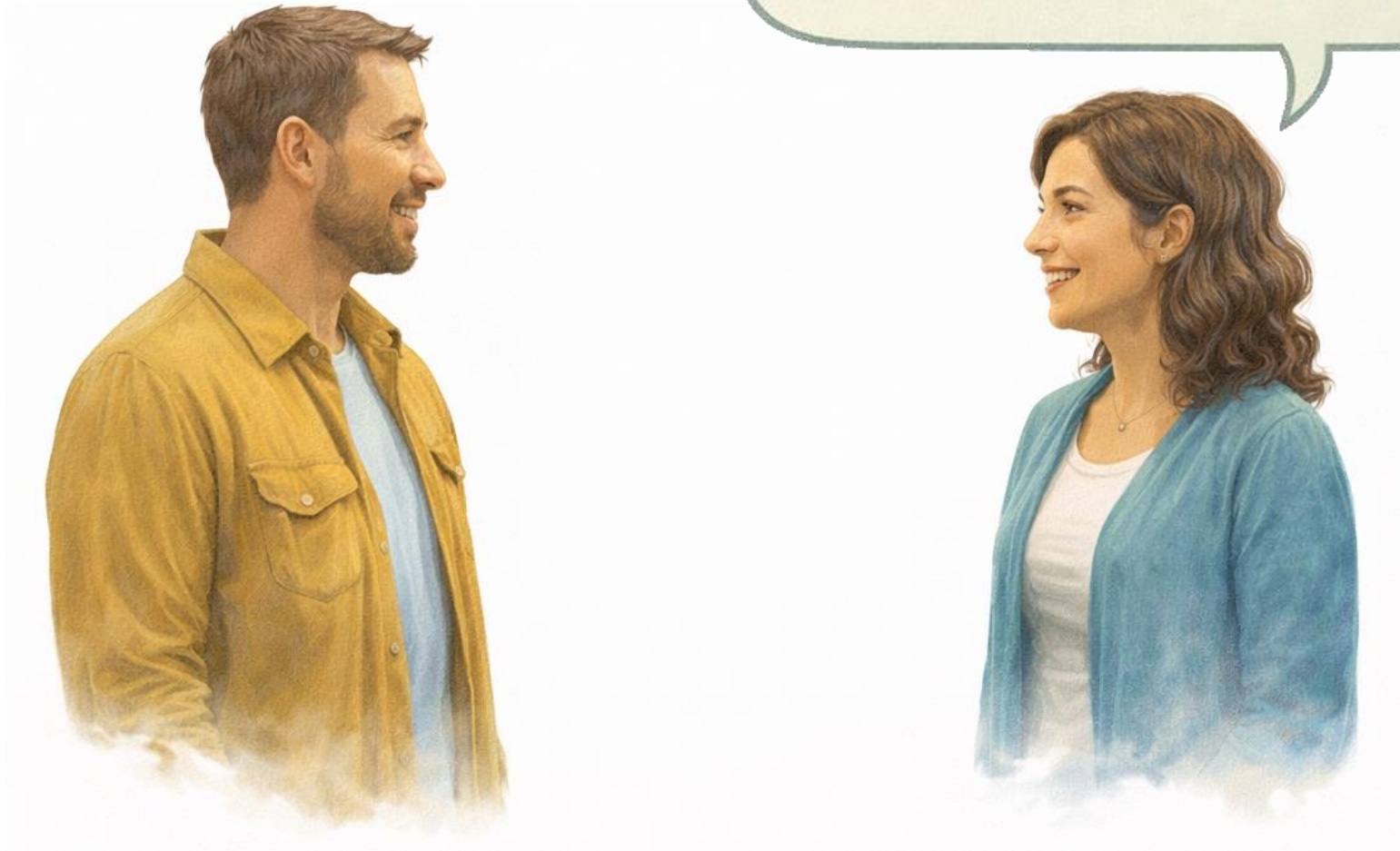
1517 Martin Luther
The Reformation



There are hundreds of Protestant denominations and groups in the UK, some more liberal, some 'tighter', and each one believing they are right, and have 'The Truth'.

A potentially very triggering question!

Which church do you go to?

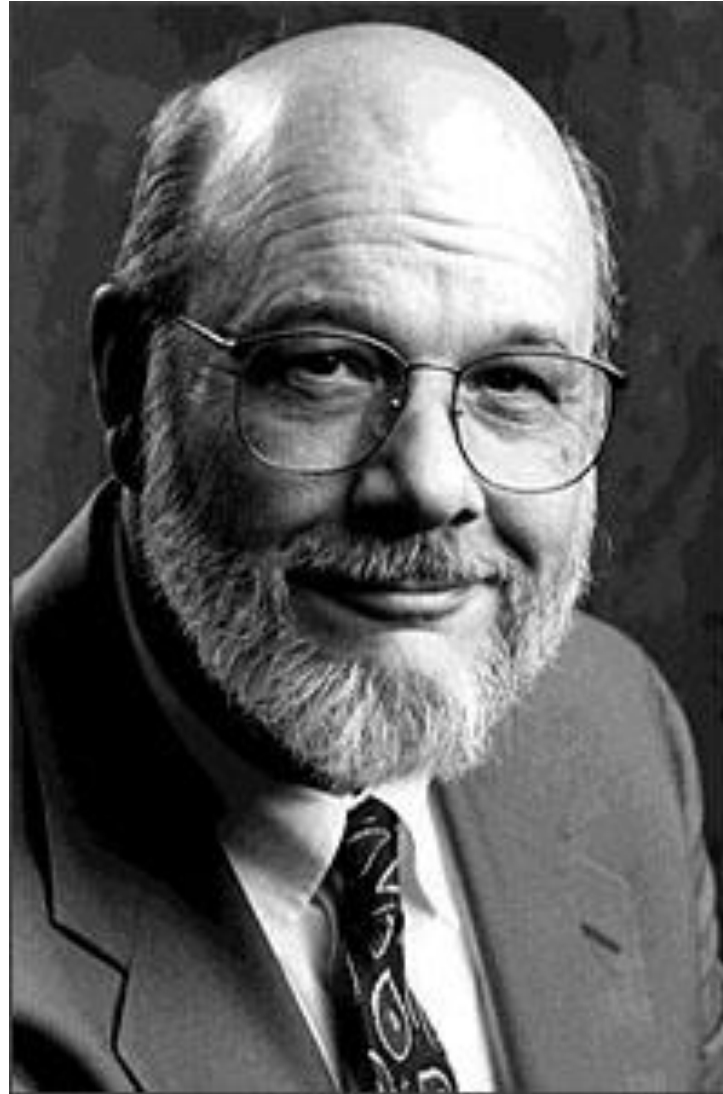
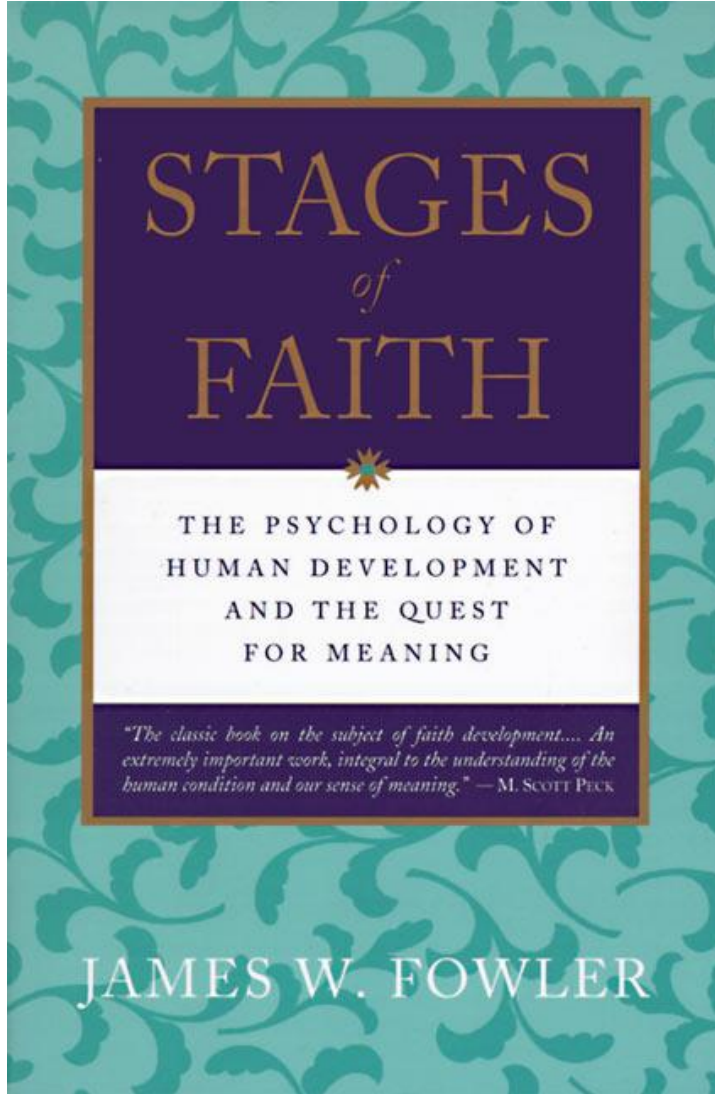




Stages of Faith

James Fowler





Fowler's Stages of Faith

Stage 1 : The Innocent



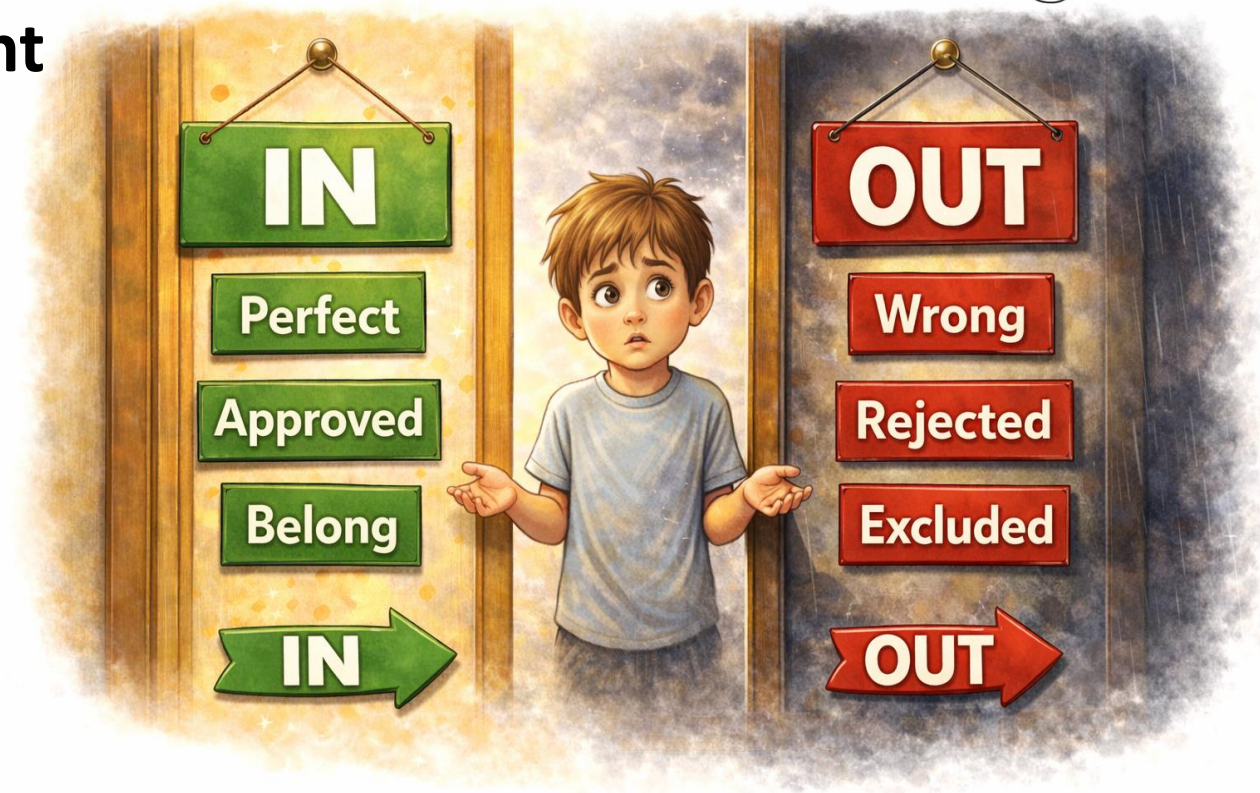
- Fantasy world
- Stories
- The Bible / Fairy Tales / TV
- Early experiences in the home
- Taboos and practices in the family/spiritual community



Stage 2 : The Literalist

- Ideas/stories/explanations of faith are understood literally
- Community is church, Sunday School or similar
- No concept of paradox – it's right or wrong, you're in or out
- No objectivity – strongly held values
- Critical of anyone 'different'
- Security, deep conviction, commitment

God is stern, a just but loving parent, someone who makes the rules and tells you what to do.



Stage 3 : The Loyalist

- Conformist – tribal – being with like-minded people
- Have the uniform, card-carrying evangelicals
- Deep convictions, loyal, committed servers
- Beliefs are not critically examined –
“I know what I believe – it’s in the Bible/ it’s what the pastor teaches... But don’t ask me to explain it.”
- Pick up values and thinking unconsciously from significant (Christian) people around us.



Stage 3 : The Loyalist

- Totally immersed in the thought system of the culture
- Dualistic – you're saved/unsaved... in/out... Christian/non-Christian
- Very certain
- Sense of being at home, family, belonging
- Great meaning in worship/ mission/ prayer/ teaching

**God is an external, transcendent Being –
“out there”, doing things for us**



Stage 4: The Critic

- Traditional answers stop making sense – Stage 3 collapses – difficult, painful transition
- Begin to take responsibility for your own actions, beliefs and values, not just what the Pastor says
- Think your own thoughts objectively – prepared to stand against significant others of the past
- No longer tow the party line – often feel alone in a group, an outsider looking in
- Can look at flaws in arguments, inconsistencies, over-simplification, unanswered questions...



Stage 4: The Critic

- Dismantling what has been learnt and experienced – greater emphasis on authenticity, congruence, consistency
- Much wider field of references (books/conferences/relationships)
- Hard for others to cope – ‘don’t rock the boat’
- Are we ‘backsliding’, or even losing our faith?

**God is changing – He’s no longer in a tidy box
Paradoxical, confusing, inconsistent.
We long for a relationship with Him
But we may also dare to be angry with Him.**



Stage 4: A Critical Time





A Personal Story

Katy



Stage 5: The Seer

- Not agnosticism or relativity – deep, committed belief, but more embracing and inclusive, and more open to mystery and paradox
- Genuine openness to other traditions and communities

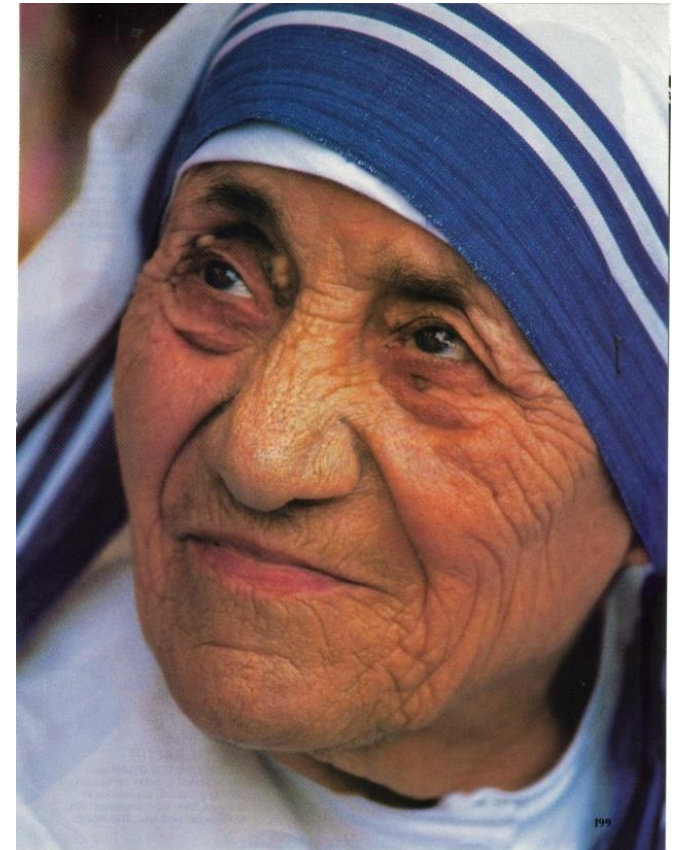
This can present a threat to those who want a clearly defined, True Believer's position, rather than the openness and humility that is encountered in Stage 5.



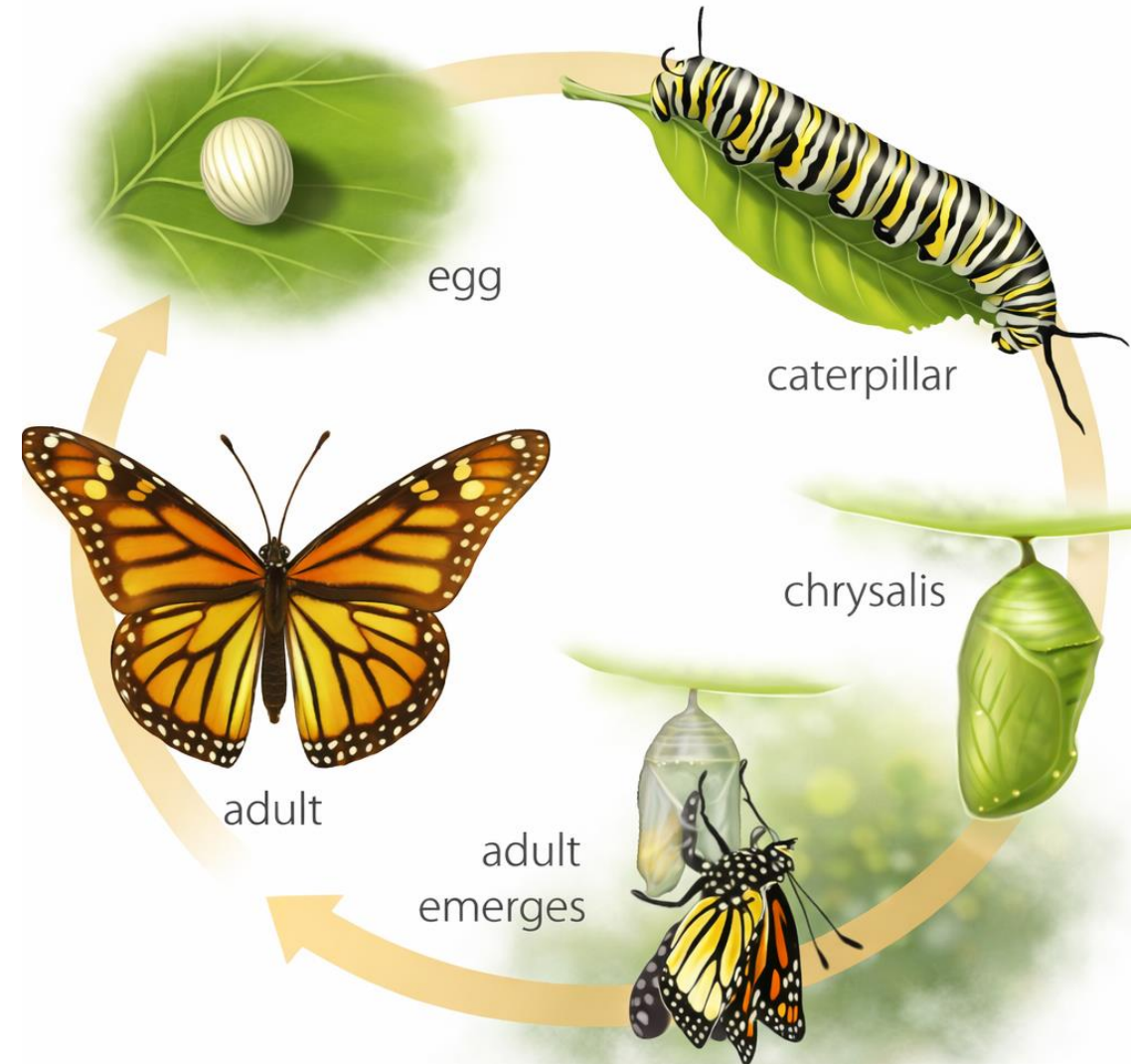
Stage 6: The Saint

- **Most difficult stage to understand – very rare**
- **Two major transitions:**
 - a move beyond the usual obsessions with survival, security and significance
 - an ever widening circle of ‘those who count’
- **A shift to the complete acceptance of the ultimate authority of God in all aspects of life**
- **Fowler found that only 1.6% of the population operated at this stage. (61 years +)**

God is the ultimate and the only thing that matters



“These transitions from one stage of faith to another can often be very traumatic. Another way of thinking of the stages is like a lens through which we view the world as we journey through life.”



Mike Fisher

The Chrysalis

Everything I believed is falling apart...

- Inside the chrysalis, the caterpillar lets go of its old form and much of its body breaks down into a kind of liquid.
- Even though it looks like everything is falling apart, something new is happening. It doesn't turn completely into goo.
- Some special cells stay intact and use that liquid to form the wings, legs and other parts of a butterfly.

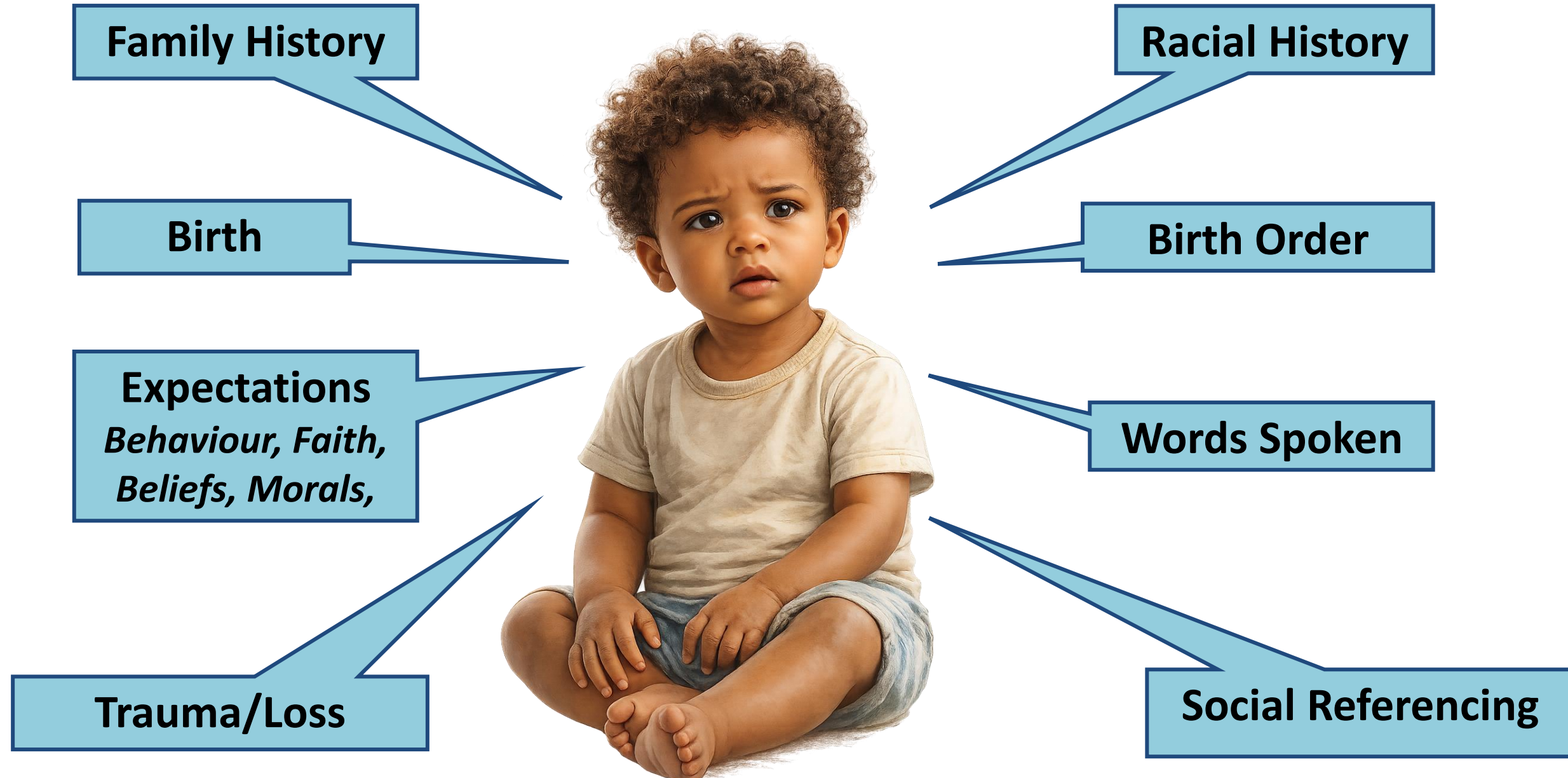


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Attachment, Coercion and Control

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Messages Received in Early Life



Impact of the Formative Years

Learning how the world works



What is
safe

What is
not safe

What is
allowed

What is
not allowed

How to
feel

How to
relate

Where
I belong

How to
behave

Attachment Dynamics in Groups

Early relationships shape how we experience safety, trust and love

Secure Attachment



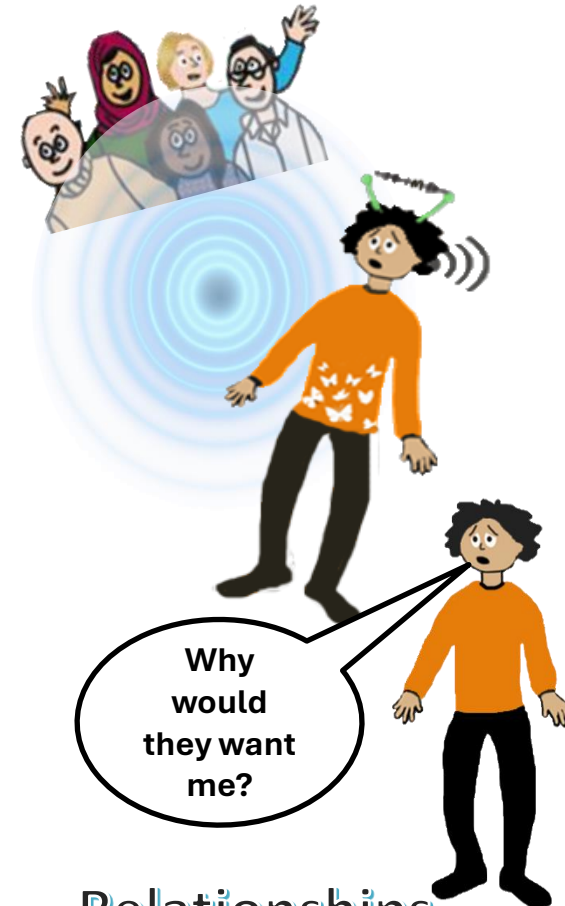
Relationships are Rich and Rewarding

Avoidant Attachment



Life is DIY

Ambivalent Attachment



Relationships are Unpredictable

Disorganised Attachment



Trauma Bonds

Dependent Attachment



*Don't leave me
Don't leave me
Don't leave me*

**Consuming
Anxiety**

How it shows up in relationships

- Clinging and over-reliance
- Difficulty setting boundaries
- Staying in unhealthy or controlling relationships
- Prioritising other people's needs over their own
- Feeling responsible for other people's emotions

This person may be over-reliant on leaders and authority figures:

- *Self-doubt: I need someone to tell me what God is saying*
- *Loss of autonomy: I don't trust myself*
- *Fear of abandonment: I'm scared to leave the group*
- *Vulnerability: A target for coercion and control*

Joining a Church: Expectations

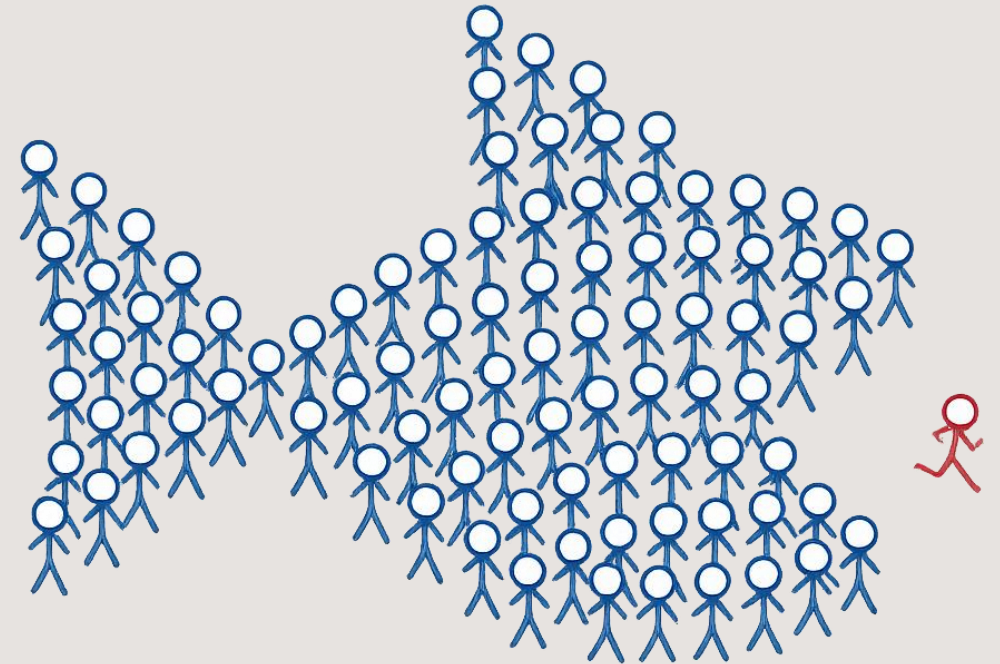
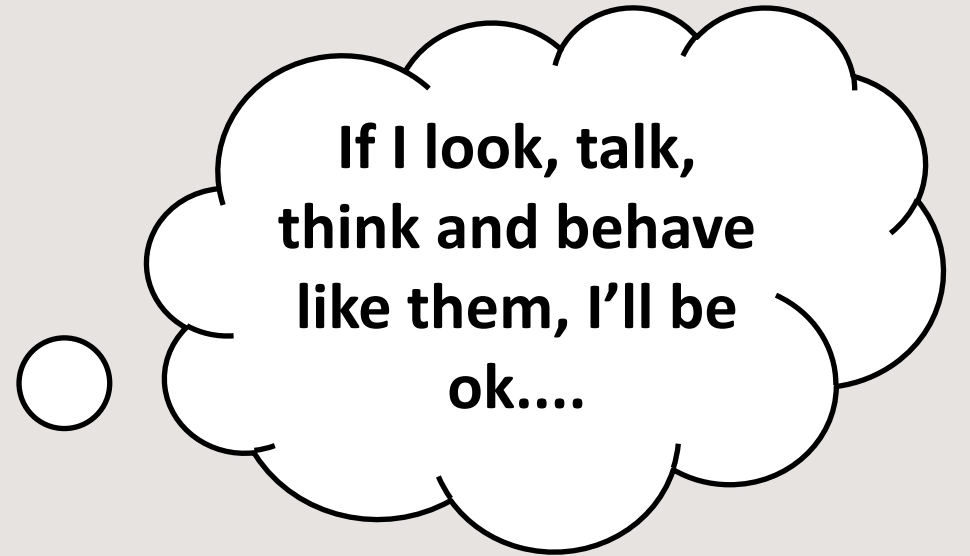
WELCOME TO YOUR NEW FAMILY!

- **Brothers and Sisters in Christ**
- **Mothers and Fathers in God**
- **You are part of the family**
- **We want you to feel at home**
- **Home Groups, House Church**
- **A place to belong**
- **Accepted “come as you are”, welcomed, wanted**
- **Stay with us!**



The Huge Expectations from the Welcome

Groups



Spiritual Coercion and Control

The misuse of spiritual language, doctrine, Scripture and moral authority to pressure, manipulate and dominate others

Silencing Dissent

Questioning framed as:

- Rebellion
- Disrupting unity
- Lack of submission
- Disobedience
- Lack of loyalty

Misuse of Authority

Power plays result in:

- Erosion of personal autonomy
- Control by guilt, shame and fear
- Distorted understanding of faith/God
- Social isolation

Active Shaming

Highlighting 'bad' behaviour

- *"You should have had more faith..."*
- *"Your attitude is sinful..."*
- *"You are having a negative influence on others..."*
- *"You are not committed..."*
- *"You don't belong with us..."*

One of the most powerful tools in spiritual control is **SHAME**

The Impact of Spiritual Coercion and Control

Internal effects:

- loss of inner authority
- difficulty trusting self
- confusion
- fear of being wrong
- chronic guilt and/or shame



Relational effects:

- dependence on authority figures
- performance for praise
- constant worry about being 'good enough'
- difficulty leaving harmful communities



Spiritual effects:

- loss of God
- fear-based relationship with God
- spiritual disorientation
- loss of meaning system



Attachment Issues and Trauma in the Counselling Room

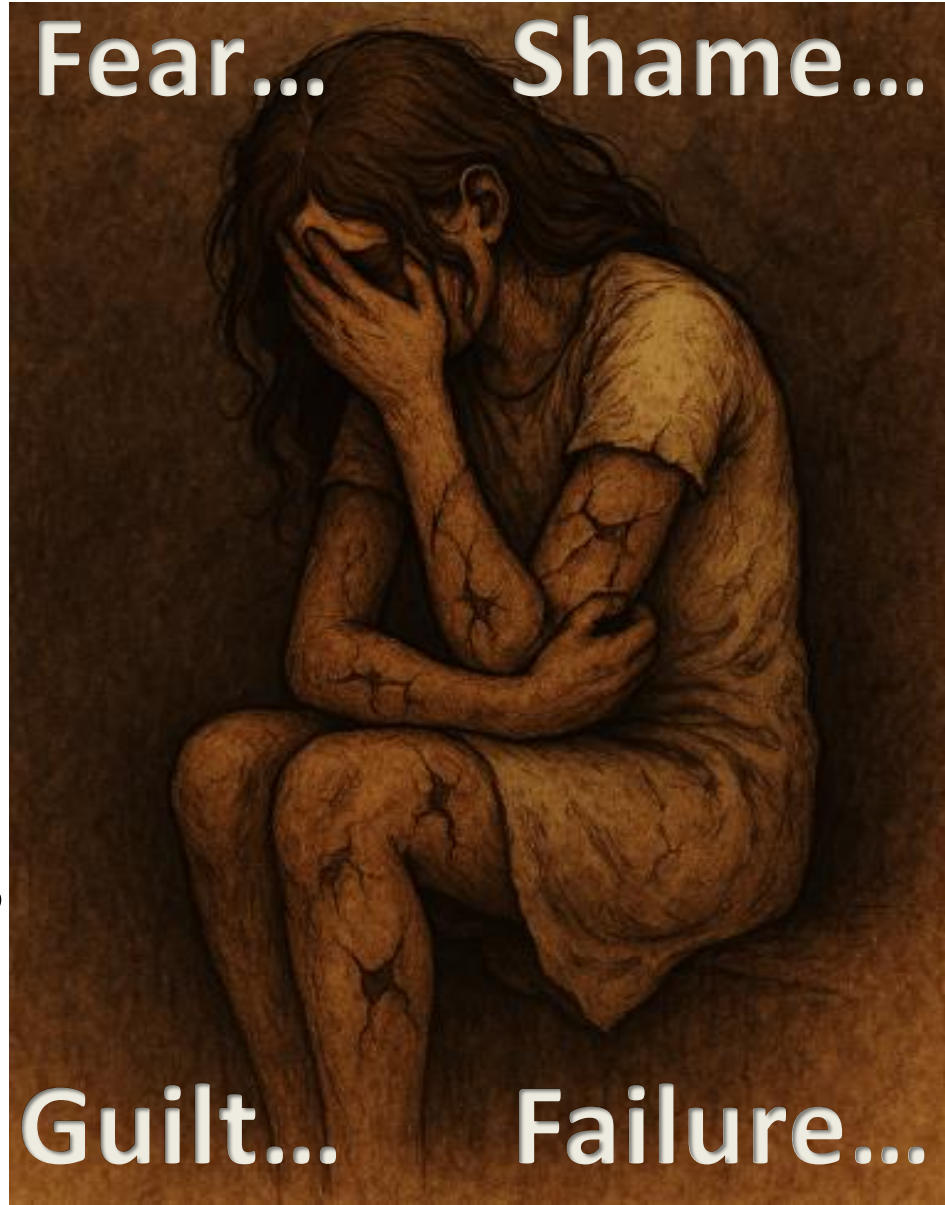
If the Counsellor does not share my faith:

- *Will they understand?*
- *Will they just tell me to leave an abusive system?*
- *Will they want me to abandon my faith?*

If the Counsellor does share my faith:

- *Will they side with my abusers?*
- *Will they try to sort me out?*
- *Will they tell me to get right with God?*
- *Will they tell me to obey and be submissive?*

- *Will they side with me and get angry with my abusers?
That will make me a bad person.*



Spiritual and Sexual Abuse



What Spiritual Wounds can mean

We long for a spiritual home which will:

- Offer us loving acceptance and compassion
- Stand with us through difficulties and challenges
- Give us roots, resilience and resourcefulness
- Enable us to grow, develop and flourish

The impact of spiritual abuse affects:

- our sense of deity – *who is God?*
- our sense of self/identity – *who am I?*
- our sense of belonging – *am I lost?*
- our moral values – *what do I believe?*
- our spiritual community – *where do I go now?*



Working with a spiritually wounded client

Clients may need to explore:

- **the resource faith once brought, which may now feel lost:** hope, forgiveness, community, prayer, meaning
- **spiritual abuse:** fear, shame, control, manipulation
- **the deep distress that has been caused:** loss of God, disorientation, dislocation, moral injury
- **the impact on their cultural and social identity:** worldview, traditions, practices, communal belonging
- **A deep sense of shame**



Many people carry deep spiritual wounds not because they lacked faith, but because something in the community overrode their voice, their experience and their sense of self.



THE POLICE



I'm keeping my eye on you in case you break the law

THE DECEIVER



I am a user and abuser

THE BULLY BOSS



I use intimidation and control to rule by fear

THE DESTROYER



I undermine, humiliate and crush people I don't like

DON'T CHALLENGE THE LEADERS



We thought you were one of us – how could you do this?

PLEASE DON'T SEE ME



I want to hide – groups aren't safe

TRY TOO HARD



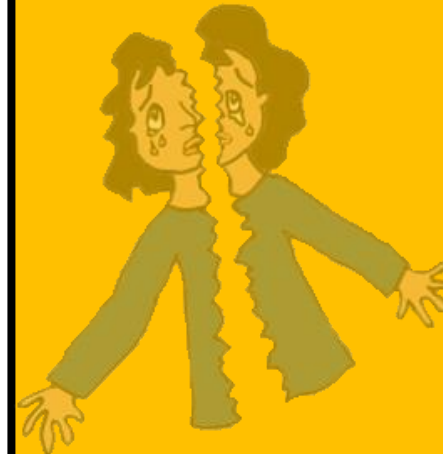
I have to be nice to everyone all the time or they won't like me

THE INNER CRITIC



Messages from the past make me doubt myself

TORN APART



I need to leave this group but it feels devastating

FOOLISH

I should have stood up to them...



Why did I let that happen?

Working with Spiritual Trauma and Abuse in the Counselling Room

Trauma symptoms may be triggered by faith language; the client may fear seeking therapy is 'sinful' or 'betraying God'; the faith community may be both a key Attachment figure and a threat.

Stay loving and accepting

- avoid criticising the church directly, or position yourself against faith
- *"Help me understand what it was like for you..."*

Name the experience gently

- *"That sounds like a lot of pressure...?"*
- *"It sounds like there wasn't much space for your voice..."*

Differentiate God from the system

- *"I wonder how this has shaped your view of God?"*
- *"Does that still feel true for you now?"*

Restore internal authority, encouraging

- agency
- discernment
- emotional validity



Spiritual Trauma and Abuse

- Coercive religion
- Fear-based teaching
- Abuse hidden or enabled by faith structures
- Misuse of scripture to control, silence, shame

In the Counselling Room

- Trauma symptoms may be triggered by faith language
- The client may fear therapy is 'sinful' or 'betraying God'
- The faith community may be both Attachment figure, and threat (Trauma Bond)



Sexual Abuse by a Church Leader



Sexual Abuse by a Church Leader

“For every person who steps forward to make a claim of childhood sexual abuse by a church leader, there are countless other victims who choose to stay silent. Many leave their faith.”



Christianity Today, 2012

Sexual Abuse by a Church Leader

- Sexual abuse by church leaders is an abuse of power and trust
- It is never the victim's fault
- Spiritual authority or language must never be used to justify or conceal abuse

Common Harmful Myths

- ***They both consented***
“Consent” is compromised where there is a power imbalance
- ***It was a one-off mistake***
Abuse is about grooming and misuse of authority
- ***We should deal with this internally***
Abuse requires external reporting and accountability
- ***Forgiveness means moving on quickly***
Forgiveness does not mean there aren't consequences / justice



Sexual Abuse by a Church Leader

Grooming

- Targeting someone vulnerable or seeking support
- Building trust and dependency
- Gradual boundary crossing (emotional → spiritual → physical)
- Secrecy and spiritual justification (*“God brought us together”, “This is special”...*)

Impact on Survivors

- Deep confusion about trust, self-worth and God
- Shame and self-blame, especially when abuse is spiritualised
- Loss of faith community
- Loss of faith
- Trauma responses (eg anxiety, dissociation)



No one ever said Sorry...



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The Dark Night of the Soul

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The Dark Night of the Soul

St John of the Cross (1542-1591), a Spanish Carmelite mystic.

He used to phrase to describe times when people experience:

- Loss of spiritual comfort
- Prayer feeling empty or impossible
- Feeling distant from God
- Questioning faith or meaning
- Emotional dryness or numbness
- A sense of being lost or spiritually disoriented
- Loneliness and silence

“God has withdrawn”



Counselling for the 'Dark Night'

For John of the Cross, while this is a time of profound existential questioning and a sense of unworthiness, it is not abandonment by God, but a deep personal – and painful - transformation.

The results can be:

- Deeper humility
- Greater compassion
- Deeper union with God
- Quieter, steadier faith



Counselling for the 'Dark Night'

Support during a Dark Night experience:

- Listen; stay in the darkness with them
- Don't try to 'fix'
- Validate the experience / empathy
- Normalise spiritual struggle
- Gentleness, patience, encouragement
- Help the client to remain connected to life and relationship



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 - • Why People don't leave a toxic community



Reasons People don't Leave a Toxic Church

- *My friends are all there...*
- *It's my family*
- *They've been so good to me...*
- *I used to feel God's presence there... It's just a dry season*
- *It's my fault*
- *My partner doesn't feel it's right to leave...*
- *A new leader might come one day and it'll be different*
- *Where else would I go?*
- *If I challenge them, I'll be a 'bad person'...*
- *I don't trust others to support me...*
- *God hasn't told me to leave...*

So why do you stay?



Reasons People don't Leave a Toxic Church

- ***I have invested so much in this church... it would undo it all if I leave...***
- ***I care about the vulnerable people in the church – I'd be leaving them more at risk than ever...***
- ***If I stay, I can challenge the leadership and effect change from within the church...***
- ***Somebody needs to be a prophetic voice into this situation...***



Leaving an Abusive System

- ***“If you find you have been supporting something with your life that you hate with your heart, there is something you can change. You can change you.”
(Jeff VanVonderen)***
 - **If you find that staying in the system is costing you your own spiritual, emotional and even physical health, or the health of those you love, you should leave.**
 - **Walking away as a conscious decision: *I can't do anything about this abusive system. But I can do something about me...***
 - **If you decide to stay you will need a lot of support from healthy people. How can you set appropriate limits and boundaries?**



Leaving an Abusive System



Leaving a place we once loved because it has become toxic and it is impossible to stay can be as painful as divorce. We can literally feel ripped apart...



“Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky, but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy – the experiences that make us most vulnerable.

Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.”

Brené Brown



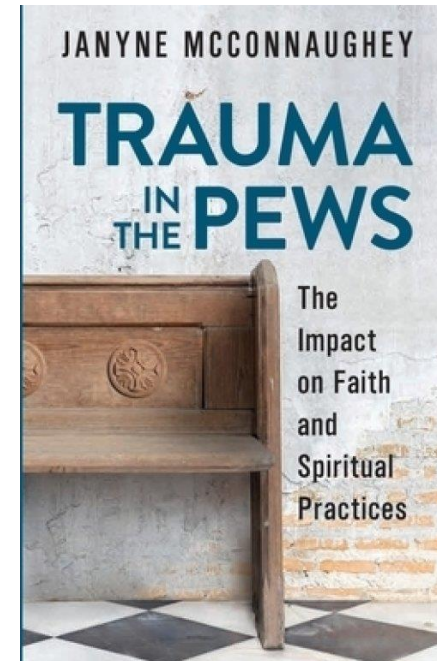
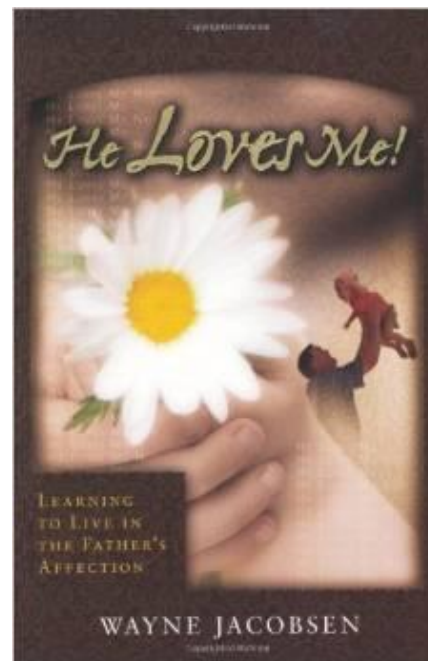
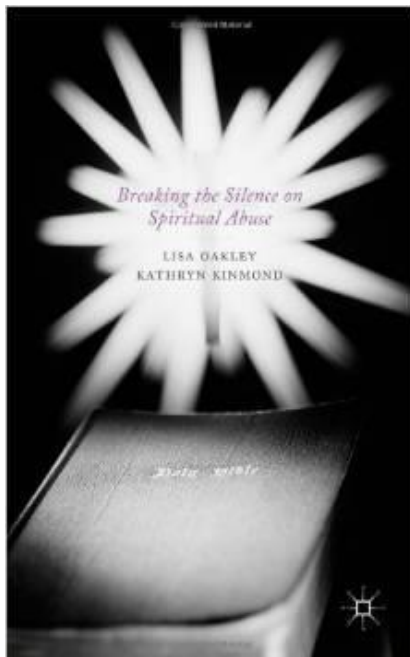
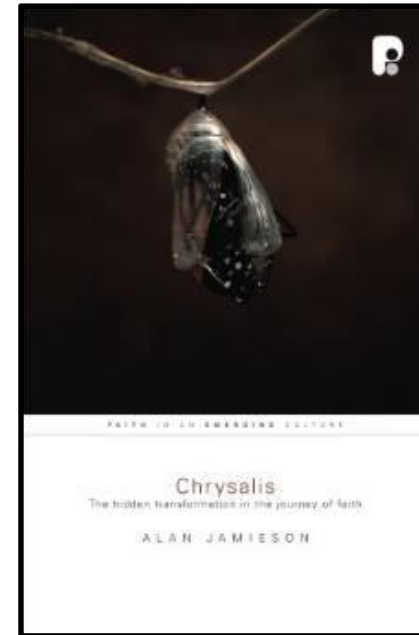
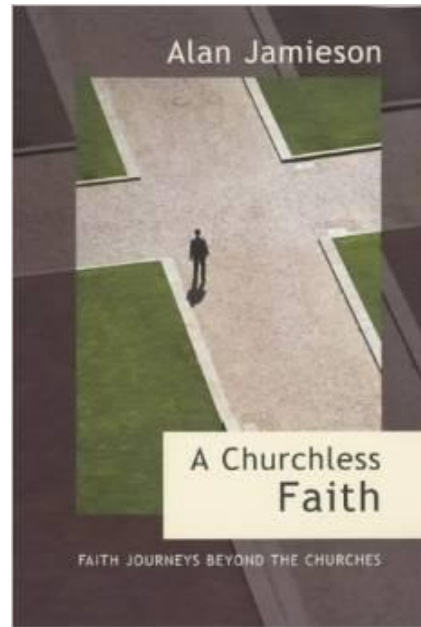
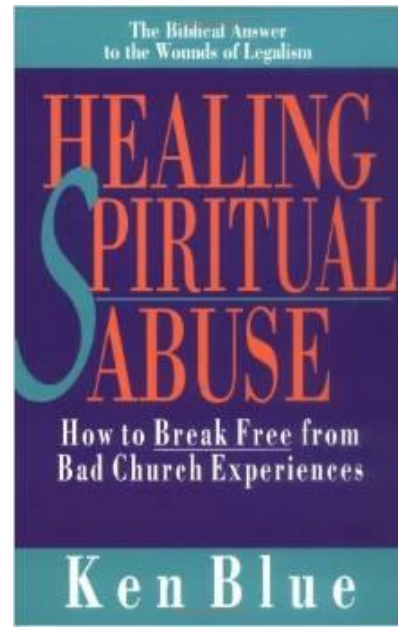
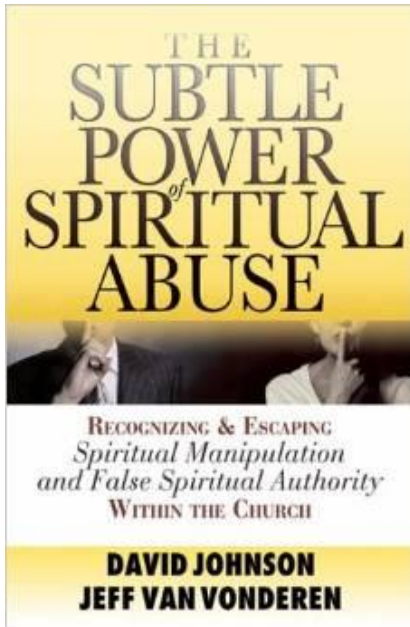
*“I wasn’t born with this shame.
It’s not my lot in life.*

*It helped me enormously
to realise that it is the
experiences that I’ve had that
have nurtured this shame in me,
but it’s not my birthright.*

*And if it’s experiences that grew
it, then new experiences can
shrink it too...”*

Carolyn Spring





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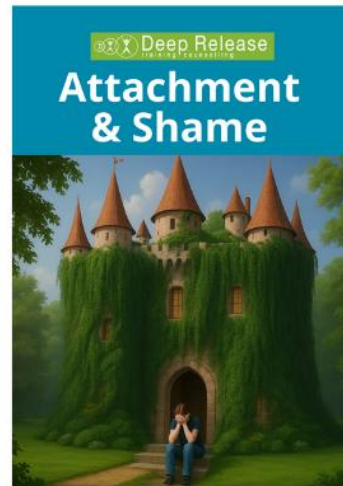
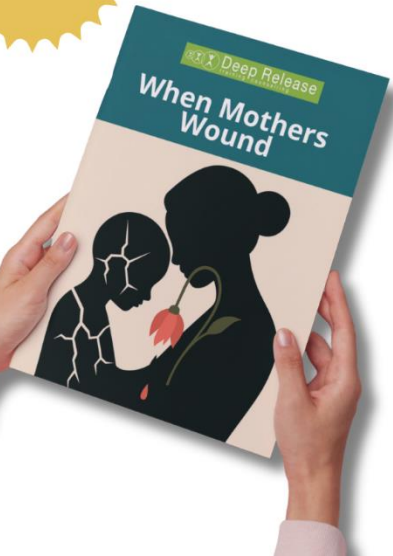
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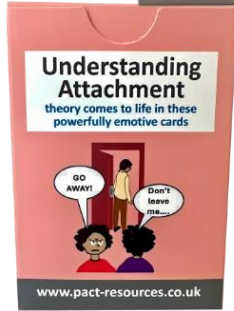
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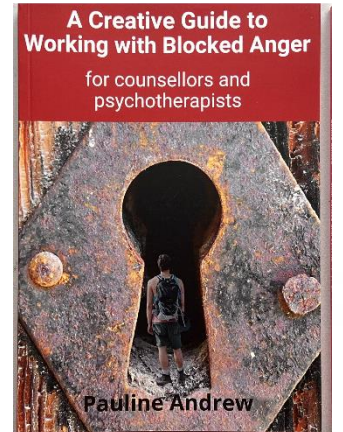
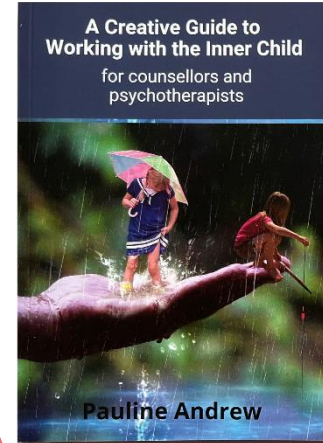
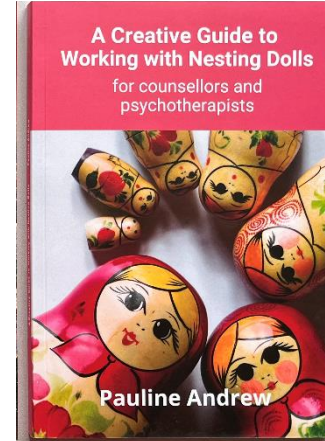


Extra Set A characters available!



Books

Also available on Kindle



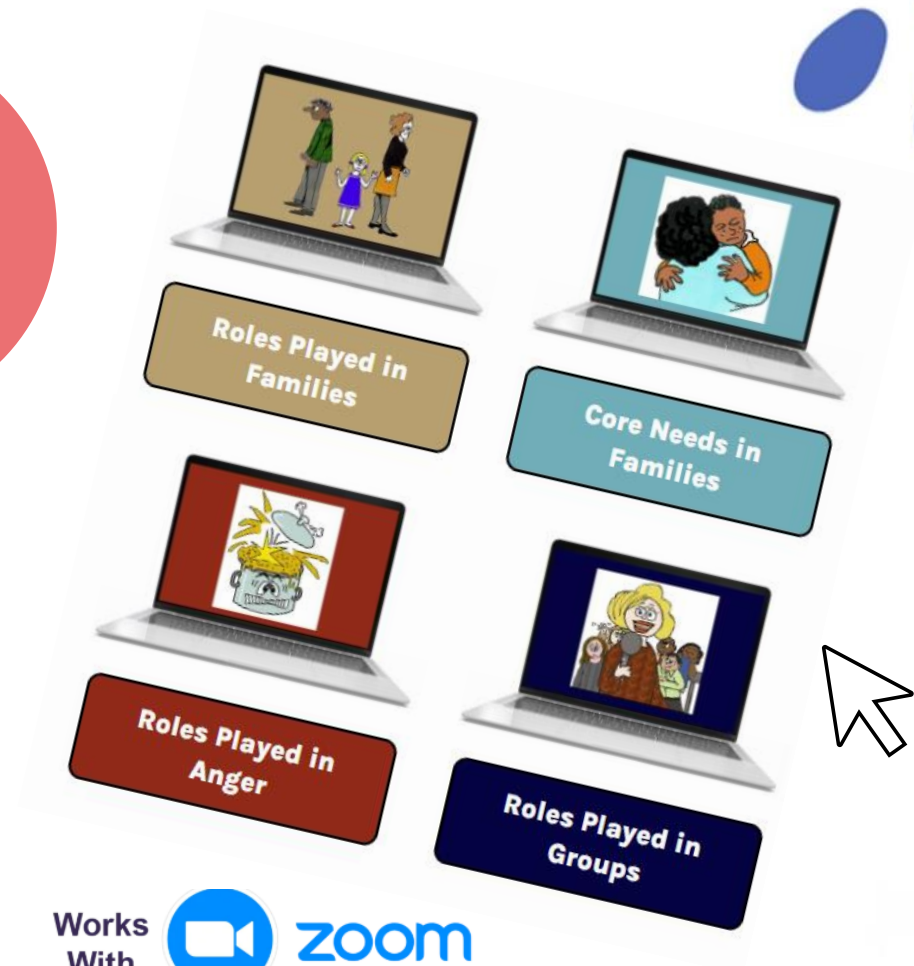
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I didn't



I gave
everything



I don't
remember
- I forget



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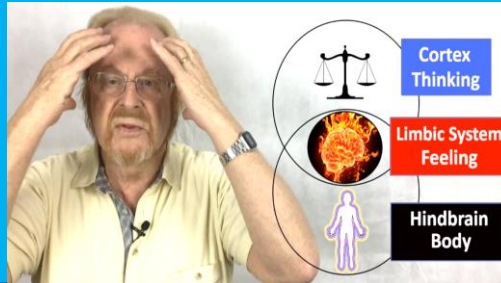


Brain Body & Beyond

Left and Right Brain



The Top Down Brain



Catch Up



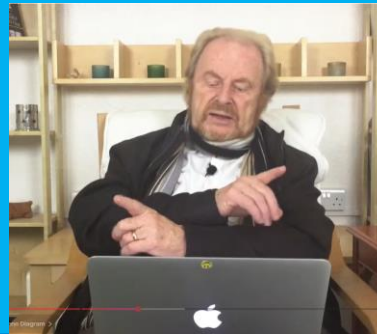
The Left and Right Axes

Sciences
Objective
Prose
Particular
Analyse
By the book
Hardware
Law
Quantitative
Zoom in

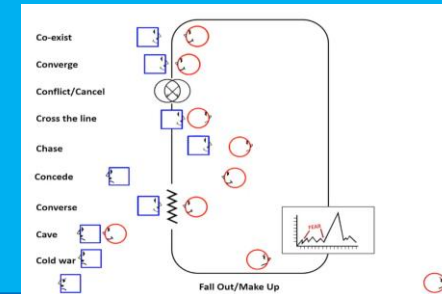


Arts
Subjective
Poetry
General
Synthesise
Extemporise
Software
Liberty
Qualitative
Zoom out

The Warzone



Fixing Broken Relationships Part 1



Fixing Broken Relationships Part 2



Please send
us your
feedback!



Thank you so much for joining us and supporting our work! If you have found the day helpful, please would like leave some feedback in the Deep Release Facebook group, or send us an email at info@deeprelease.org.uk. It would mean so much to us! 😊

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Thank you