On The Spirit of Psychotherapy

The Elementary Holmes

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Abstract

This review argues that Jeremy Holmes' The Spirit of Psychotherapy *makes a compelling case for understanding psychotherapy not simply as a clinical treatment but as a secular practice of meaning-making that addresses existential questions once largely contained within religious traditions. Rather than replacing religion, psychotherapy is presented as a protected relational space in which vulnerability, uncertainty, desire, loss, and mortality can be explored without premature closure. Holmes develops this argument by bringing psychoanalysis, attachment theory, neuroscience, philosophy, literature, and religious thought into dialogue, while proposing that both psychotherapy and spirituality help human beings tolerate uncertainty and restore connectedness.*

The review examines the conceptual strengths of Holmes' synthesis, including his use of Winnicott's transitional space, Friston's Free Energy Principle, attachment theory, and mentalisation, while also considering the limitations of his broad and associative style. Brief references are made to Holmes' clinical illustrations, which depict psychotherapy as a practice that restores agency, enlarges transitional space, and enables patients to relate differently to suffering and loss. The paper concludes that Holmes ultimately defends psychoanalysis less as a theoretical doctrine than as an ethical and cultural practice of attentive presence, preserving a place for inner life within an increasingly instrumental and disenchanted world.

Introduction

Jeremy Holmes is a British psychiatrist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist who, drawing on decades of clinical experience and wide-ranging intellectual curiosity, has developed a distinctive voice at the intersection of attachment theory, psychoanalysis, and culture. Through an extensive body of work on attachment and psychodynamic psychotherapy, and as a Visiting Professor at the University of Exeter, he has consistently sought ways to restore language and meaning to the inner life. Throughout his work, psychoanalysis and neuroscience are brought into a productive dialogue.

The Spirit of Psychotherapy is an unusual, ambitious, and in many respects courageous book. It does not simply set out to explain psychotherapy once again, nor does it offer yet another defence of the psychoanalytic tradition against its contemporary critics. Holmes aims both higher and more diffusely at the same time. His central claim is that, within our disenchanted late-modern world, psychotherapy fulfils a role once largely occupied by religion. Not because therapy should replace religion, nor because it functions as a covert secular church, but because both domains, each in their own way, attempt to address human vulnerability, uncertainty, loss, guilt, desire, finitude, and the search for meaning.

At first sight, such a claim risks sounding rather grandiose. Holmes is fully aware of this. The book's tone is therefore disarmingly modest. It is erudite, widely read, and theoretically ambitious, yet also tentative, exploratory, at times almost apologetic. It moves freely between psychoanalysis, attachment theory, neuroscience, philosophy, literature, religious studies, and personal clinical experience. The result is not always tightly structured, but it is frequently illuminating. Rather than constructing a closed theoretical system, Holmes seeks to open a field of resonances.

His central intuition is deceptively simple. Although traditional religious frameworks have largely lost their self-evident authority, the human need for places to pause before what transcends ordinary existence has not disappeared. For Holmes, the consulting room constitutes such a space. Not because revelations occur there, but because it makes possible a form of attention that resists the contemporary dominance of utility, speed, protocol, and measurability. In this sense, psychotherapy becomes a form of secular spirituality: a practice of attending to inner life, relational truth, and those dimensions of experience that cannot be reduced either to symptoms or to solutions.

A Silence That Is Not Empty

The book opens, significantly, in a Quaker meeting house: an austere, silent, almost empty room. There is no spectacle, no ornament, no doctrinal excess. Yet the emptiness is anything but empty. Something lingers there—or perhaps more accurately, something becomes possible. This provides Holmes with his first major analogy. Just as a religious space, through its carefully bounded silence, creates a distinctive intensity of presence, so too does the consulting room establish what might be called an absence-presence: a contained emptiness within which aspects of inner life can gradually emerge.

From this starting point, Holmes poses his fundamental question. Does psychoanalytic psychotherapy still have an essential role to play in the twenty-first century, or has it become an antiquated, semi-obsolete practice sustained only by initiates continuing to worship dead gods? His answer is unequivocal. In a culture dominated by brief, standardised, problem-solving, and commodified therapy, he argues that we urgently need a practice that resists premature closure, refuses to neutralise mystery too quickly, and approaches the individual not merely as a bearer of symptoms but as an existential being.

The book's tone is thereby established. Holmes has written neither a technical manual nor a clinical handbook, but rather a diagnosis of contemporary culture disguised as a psychotherapeutic essay.

One of Holmes' strongest arguments concerns the limitations of evidence-based practice language. He is by no means anti-scientific. On the contrary, he frequently draws upon empirical research, attachment theory, mentalisation, and outcome studies. Yet even when we know psychotherapy works, we remain far less able to articulate precisely what happens as someone gradually learns to mourn, tolerate ambiguity, recognise destructive patterns, recover agency, or inhabit loss differently.

Symptomatic improvement, in other words, is not the same as existential transformation. Holmes wishes to preserve precisely this latter dimension. Psychotherapy addresses not only depression, anxiety, or trauma, but also the deeper question of how one lives with contingency, injustice, mortality, dependency, moral uncertainty, and incompleteness. These are traditionally philosophical and religious questions, yet they inevitably return within the consulting room. Therapists may choose to ignore them, but doing so does not make them disappear.

Holmes therefore argues that, within a secular culture, psychotherapy has become one of the few institutionally protected spaces where inner life is taken seriously without being immediately translated into performance, efficiency, or well-being management.

The Social and the Ecological

A second major movement in the book is Holmes' resistance to an overly individualised understanding of psychological suffering. Although symptoms present themselves in individuals, they are always embedded in life histories, relationships, inequality, loss, humiliation, social fragmentation, and often within a broader ecological environment. Holmes argues that psychotherapy has traditionally devoted enormous attention to the inner world while paying comparatively little attention to the world to which the patient returns once the session has ended. Just as medicine advanced not only through microbiology but also through public health, psychotherapy, he suggests, should become more attentive to the contexts in which people actually live.

This is an important corrective. A therapy that restores some degree of inner freedom, only to send the patient back into unchanged humiliation, chronic poverty, or destructive relationships, will struggle to sustain its gains. Holmes therefore advocates not only deeper psychological understanding but also a broader psychotherapeutic vision.

It also becomes clear here that his notion of spirituality is far from vague or ethereal. It is consistently grounded in connectedness: connectedness with other people, with the natural world, with history, time, and mortality. Human beings are not simply creatures of intrapsychic conflict but knots within a much larger web of relationships.

One of the book's more daring theoretical foundations is Holmes' appropriation of Karl Friston's Free Energy Principle. In simplified terms, this theory proposes that living organisms continually seek to minimise the discrepancy between their predictions about the world and the sensory information they receive. In this view, life consists of maintaining order amid an ocean of potentially chaotic stimuli and unexpected events.

Holmes detects an intriguing parallel between this model, psychotherapy, and spirituality. Both psychotherapy and religion, he argues, attempt in different ways to cope with radical uncertainty. The psyche is constantly flooded with experiences, affects, fantasies, losses, and conflicts that cannot be assimilated immediately. Therapy offers a space in which these "unbound" experiences can, together with another person, gradually be contained, named, and transformed. Religion, for its part, provides top-down frameworks—stories, rituals, beliefs, and communities—that help bind uncertainty within meaningful structures.

Yet Holmes' most interesting move lies not in his use of Friston itself but in what he draws from it. For him, a residue always remains. No model, interpretation, religious worldview, or psychotherapeutic theory ever fully captures reality. Something invariably escapes our attempts

to master it. It is this irreducible remainder that Holmes, cautiously yet consistently, identifies as the realm of spirit.

This is an especially fruitful idea. Spirit is not conceived as a supernatural substance but as the name for the dimension of human experience that representation, control, or protocol cannot fully exhaust. Psychotherapy and spirituality meet precisely in their shared engagement with this excess.

To anchor this relationally, Holmes turns to Donald Winnicott's concept of transitional space. This intermediate realm is where the child plays, dreams, experiments, pretends, and discovers, without fantasy and external reality collapsing into one another or mutually annihilating each other. Holmes regards the consulting room as an adult version of precisely such a space.

Psychotherapy thus becomes a place where one can inhabit, together with another person, the territory between brute reality and imprisoned subjectivity. It is neither pure factuality nor pure fantasy, but a field of play in which affects may be regulated, hypotheses tested, memories reorganised, and meanings tentatively formed. Holmes understands this not merely as a clinical description but also as a spiritual one. Within this intermediate space, the unknown need not be eliminated prematurely; it may appear without immediately being closed down.

This idea recurs throughout the book. Therapy is not simply a place where people acquire insight. It is also a space in which they can once again play with experience without being overwhelmed by it.

Defining Spirituality, Secularity, Faith, and the Sacred

Holmes next clarifies several key concepts: spirituality, secularity, religion, faith, the sacred, transcendence, and immanence. He does so not as a systematic philosopher but as an essayist whose thinking remains consistently relational. Spirituality is associated with breath, inspiration, vitality, meaning, and the invisible dimensions of life that nevertheless continue to exert their influence. Following Charles Taylor, secularity is understood not simply as the absence of religion but as a condition in which belief has ceased to be self-evident, while believers and non-believers alike remain capable of experiencing absence, anomie, or what Taylor famously calls "fullness."

At this point, Holmes' broader project becomes clearer. The sacred need not necessarily refer to a transcendent God. Secular experiences—a painting by Johannes Vermeer, a pastoral landscape, a moment of sustained attention, or a psychotherapeutic conversation—may possess

a comparable intensity in which ordinary reality is not transcended but deepened. Holmes' spirituality is therefore fundamentally immanent rather than transcendent: not another world beyond this one, but another way of inhabiting the world we already share.

The Consulting Room as a Place of Practice

In the middle chapters, Holmes shifts towards a more concrete discussion of psychotherapy as praxis. Therapy is understood not primarily as theory or technique but as a distinctive form of disciplined practice: a bounded space, a protected period of time, an unspoken discipline of speaking and listening, of waiting, of resisting premature intervention, and of remaining attentive to affect and repetition.

This opens a compelling parallel with religious practice. Just as places of worship cultivate particular postures, rhythms, and rituals, the consulting room likewise organises a secular ritual. One enters, sits down, perhaps begins speaking hesitantly; there is silence, gradual ordering, repetition, at times tears, at times apparent emptiness—and yet something happens. Nothing spectacular, but precisely for that reason something profound.

Holmes insists that psychotherapy does not work simply because the correct technique has been applied. What takes place cannot be reduced to procedure. It is something performative and relationally creative. Each session becomes a modest work of art in which something comes into being that did not exist beforehand.

One of the strongest and most concrete themes in these chapters concerns agency. Many patients arrive with their transitional space effectively collapsed. Life seems to happen to them, or they remain imprisoned in repetitive patterns that allow no alternatives. Therapy seeks to restore the minimal possibility of choice, movement, difference, and self-observation.

This happens not through encouragement or advice, but because the patient is genuinely listened to, taken seriously, followed, and not prematurely overwritten by the therapist's own formulations. Here, Holmes explicitly draws upon attachment theory. Just as a sensitive parent waits for the child's initiatives and reflects them back in a marked yet containing manner, so too the therapist creates a situation in which the patient may once again become a source of meaning and action.

Agency is therefore not understood in voluntaristic terms. It does not imply omnipotence but rather the capacity to experience oneself as a participant in one's own life, even where one's history remains painful and limiting. The patient comes to recognise not only what has

happened to them but also how they themselves contribute, often unknowingly, to the repetition of familiar patterns. This is not an accusation but a restoration of dignity.

Holmes subsequently returns to one of psychoanalysis's most enduring themes: the inner world. Yet he approaches it relationally. The inner world is not a private chamber that simply exists in isolation. From the very beginning, it is co-created through interaction with others. The child's internal dialogue originates within an external dialogue. What later becomes self-reflection begins life as attuned communication with another mind.

Therapy attempts to make that internal dialogue audible once more. What has become silent, split off, or automatised is spoken again, listened to, reorganised, and gradually understood. Yet the process remains inherently paradoxical. The inner life is radically private while, from its very beginning, having been relationally mediated.

A Cultural Critique: Psychotherapy as Outsider

At the same time, Holmes continues to regard psychotherapy as a culturally ambiguous practice. It seeks recognition as a professional discipline, yet derives much of its strength precisely because it never fully conforms to the prevailing logic of efficiency, market value, and instrumental utility. Once psychotherapy is completely absorbed into protocols and symptom management, it risks losing something of its spirit.

To illustrate this tension, Holmes invokes figures such as the fool and the outsider—those who stand neither fully inside nor entirely outside the system, and who can therefore articulate truths inaccessible to its insiders. The therapist can give voice to experiences that remain unspeakable or unbearable within ordinary social discourse. Yet this position is inevitably precarious. Psychotherapy can be marginalised, but it can equally be commodified; it may remain quietly subversive, or become merely another component of the contemporary wellness industry. In this sense, Holmes' book also pleads against completely flattening psychotherapy into a marketable product.

In Chapter Five, Holmes reverses his perspective. Rather than asking how psychotherapy functions as a form of secular spirituality, he explores how spirituality itself may function therapeutically. Drawing upon interviews with religious believers, he examines what faith actually provides. The answers are hardly surprising, but they are carefully elaborated: religion offers comfort, a secure base, community, meaning, hope, moral orientation, and a framework within which suffering and loss can be endured.

Here Holmes' attachment-theoretical perspective proves particularly convincing. God appears as the ultimate attachment figure: available, containing, wise, and reliably present. For some believers this represents the continuation of an early experience of secure attachment; for others, a symbolic response to profound deprivation. Holmes sees no reason to reduce religious belief to psychological illusion. Rather than exposing religion as wish fulfilment, he seeks to understand it as a psychologically and existentially effective response to human vulnerability.
At the same time, he preserves an important distinction. Religion often offers top-down certainty, whereas psychotherapy generally cultivates the capacity to tolerate and explore uncertainty. Both address the same fundamental human predicament, but through markedly different structures.

From *Jane Eyre* to Tolstoy

One of the book's strongest chapters is Holmes's discussion of Jane Eyre. He employs Charlotte Brontë's novel not merely as an illustration but as an ethical model. Jane embodies the question of how one ought to act when desire and principle come into conflict. She loves Rochester, yet refuses his invitation to live with him outside the conventions of marriage. Not out of prudery, Holmes argues, but because she understands the relational consequences of their desire more clearly than Rochester himself.
Holmes interprets Jane as an ethical mentaliser: someone who can view herself from the outside, understand another person from within, and appreciate the wider implications of human action. In this sense she becomes almost a model for the therapist. She attends not only to immediate impulse but also to the structural damage that a purely narcissistic solution would inflict.
Through *Jane Eyre*, Holmes develops an important distinction. Religions frequently formulate explicit precepts: this is permitted, that is forbidden. Psychotherapists are generally less inclined to prescribe what people ought to do. Instead, it seeks to cultivate a way of listening—to oneself and to others—that allows less destructive forms of action gradually to emerge. Yet psychotherapy is by no means value-neutral. Beneath its technical neutrality lies a recognisable ethical commitment: towards less splitting, less exploitation, greater complexity, and a fuller recognition of the other as genuinely other.
In Chapter Seven Holmes arrives at what is arguably the conceptual centre of his entire project: mentalisation. The capacity to view oneself from the outside and others from within necessarily

entails recognising that knowledge always remains provisional. I can never know exactly what another person thinks, nor are my own motives ever fully transparent to me.

Holmes sees in this epistemic humility a profound affinity with mature spirituality. Genuine faith does not abolish uncertainty but learns to live with it without being overwhelmed by it. This enables him to distinguish between pre-mentalising forms of religion—literalistic, fundamentalist, and defensive—and more mature forms that acknowledge their own limitations.

The strength of this analysis lies precisely in its fairness. Holmes neither idealises religion nor demonises it. Indeed, he readily acknowledges that certain immature or absolutist forms of belief may be psychologically highly effective precisely because they reduce uncertainty so powerfully. Their effectiveness, however, does not necessarily make them reflective or psychologically mature.

This leads naturally to Holmes' critique of certain contemporary forms of spirituality, including the work of Eckhart Tolle and some varieties of mindfulness practice. Such approaches may offer considerable comfort by teaching that one need not fully identify with one's thoughts and that one can observe inner experience without becoming engulfed by it. Holmes readily acknowledges this value. Yet he also warns against too rapid an evacuation of conflict. Therapy often requires not elegantly transcending suffering, but first genuinely encountering, enduring, and mentalising it.

This is one of the book's strongest arguments. Holmes resists every form of spiritual bypassing. Authentic psychological transformation does not occur by abandoning the self before it has been sufficiently established. There must first be a self before one can meaningfully speak of selflessness.

With his beautiful discussion of the oak tree scene in War and Peace, Holmes perhaps offers his most persuasive illustration of secular spirituality. After disappointment and loss, Prince Andrei withdraws into himself and initially identifies with an ancient oak that appears barren, embittered, and lifeless. Later, after his encounter with the young Natasha and a subtle affective shift, he sees the same tree differently: alive, full of sap, participating once again in the renewal of spring.

Holmes interprets this not as sentimental projection but as a genuine transformation in connectedness. Prince Andrei can once again be moved by something beyond himself. The world regains depth. For Holmes, this is spirituality without God: not transcendence but an immanent reconnection with nature, eros, time, and life itself.

Here, his understanding of connectedness becomes fully apparent. It signifies not merely social attachment but an existential experience of belonging to a larger pattern that does not coincide with one's own wounded ego.

Spiritual Psychotherapy Revisited: Returning to Clinical Practice

In the final chapters, Holmes returns to the consulting room and articulates more explicitly what a spiritually informed psychotherapy might look like in practice. The therapeutic setting should be safe, uncluttered, and receptive. The therapist safeguards the frame but must never colonise its contents. Rather, they should remain open to the unconscious, to what emerges without prior intention, and to the unexpected. Here Holmes returns to Wilfred Bion's celebrated injunction to work "without memory or desire", interpreting it as a form of therapeutic *kenosis*: an emptying of oneself of excessive intention and premature certainty.

These are among the book's most attractive pages, precisely because the spirituality of psychotherapy is located not in elevated subject matter but in therapeutic attitude: restraint, attentiveness, not-knowing, respect for negativity, and the capacity to wait.

At the same time, Holmes identifies one value that cannot be relinquished: hope. Not hope as facile reassurance, but as the structural conviction that life—even when deeply damaged and entangled—remains capable of movement, reorganisation, and renewal. This hope also extends to the therapist, who may themselves require supervision in order to sustain it.

The final chapter reads almost as a personal credo. Holmes identifies the values that guide his clinical practice: trust, recognition of the ubiquity of suffering, professional integrity, and above all, non-attachment. What is particularly appealing is that he does not interpret this Buddhist concept as emotional detachment or coldness. Instead, he presents it as something strikingly close to secure attachment: the capacity to love without possessing, to lose without disintegrating, and to hope without becoming rigidly attached to outcomes.

His philosophical position also becomes clearer. Freedom is never absolute. History, embodiment, trauma, and repetition always shape us. Yet within what psychoanalysis has often called *thirdness*—a transitional relational space—there nevertheless emerges a limited but genuine form of freedom: the possibility of not being entirely identical with the forces that determine us. Therapy does not liberate us from our chains, but, borrowing the image of Dylan Thomas, it may enable us to sing within them.

Conclusion

The Spirit of Psychotherapy is not a tightly argued book. At times it is almost too generous, too wide-ranging, too associative. Holmes moves effortlessly from neurobiology to Winnicott, from Bion to Buddhism, from attachment theory to literary criticism, without always constructing the conceptual bridges in sufficient detail. Resonance occasionally takes precedence over logical progression. Moreover, his concept of *spirit* remains deliberately open—and for that very reason somewhat vulnerable to charges of vagueness.

Yet this is by no means the final verdict. The book's greatest achievement lies precisely in its willingness to articulate something that contemporary psychotherapy frequently experiences but seldom reflects upon explicitly: that psychotherapy is not merely a treatment but also a cultural practice of attention, a secular refuge for inner life, a place where uncertainty need not immediately be eliminated, and where the human being may appear not only as a functional individual but also as an existential subject.

Holmes defends psychoanalysis here not as a doctrine but as an ethos. Not as a closed theoretical system but as a practice that preserves room for uncertainty, relationality, tragedy, and hope. This is what makes the book, despite its unevenness, both timely and deeply relevant.

Ultimately, Holmes seeks to preserve neither a particular school of psychotherapy nor a specialised professional vocabulary, but something far more fragile: the possibility that, in an increasingly disenchanted world, places may still remain where people can speak as though their inner lives truly matter.

Reference

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