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Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges

John Swinton (2020)
Eerdmans

Reviewed by Jeffery Tabone, Ph.D.

Student affairs professionals are not strangers to working with students facing mental health challenges. Having spent 10 years as a Resident Director, some of my most salient work experiences have included coaching students through minor depressive episodes, to joining students in the ER as they struggled through suicidal ideation, and even once turning down a parent who wanted to use my RD apartment as a location to pray for and exorcise a demon out of their child. Nothing quite prepared me for those initial encounters with distressing student behavior on account of their mental health. In all honesty, as a younger and new professional in student affairs, I wish I had the resource of John Swinton's *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges*. Swinton's text offers Christians in the student affairs profession a holistic approach for readers to reimagine what care, support, and healing looks like within mental health.

Finding Jesus in the Storm is an exemplary interdisciplinary text revolving around human flourishing. Swinton's expertise as a registered mental health nurse, mental health chaplain, and professor of practical theology and pastoral care at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, lends itself to an accessible book drawing

upon lived wisdom rooted in the academic disciplines of psychology, theology, and philosophy. Readers quickly get a sense of the book's purpose as Swinton articulates his desire to "provide readers with rich, deep, and thick descriptions of the spiritual experiences of Christians living with mental health challenges" (p. 2). A secondary aim of the text is to demonstrate "ways in which Christians with severe mental health challenges can *live* well and *live* faithfully even in the most disconcerting storms" (p. 3). To achieve these ends, thick and rich descriptions play a significant role in the organization of the book's argument. In line with the study's phenomenological methodology, participants in Swinton's research offer expansive qualitative feedback pertaining to their lived experience as Christians with disorienting mental health. In essence, Swinton demonstrates that current descriptions surrounding mental health challenges have remained far too "thin" (p. 14) in that our descriptions surrounding the phenomena "provide high-level insights but no low-level details" (p. 14). In contrast, Swinton says, "Thick descriptions lead to thick and rich interpretations. Thick and rich descriptions and interpretations lead to thick and rich practices" (p. 39).

True to this purpose, Swinton organizes his book around the theme of *redescribing*. Chapters 1 and 2 comprise a section called "The Art of Description" wherein Swinton develops his argument pertaining to the need for rich accounts and descriptive narratives within the field of mental health. Chapter 3 argues for the need to redescribe diagnosis. Chapters 4 through 10 provides insightful commentary on redescribing depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. In particular, these chapters are rich with expansive qualitative accounts gathered from Christian individuals who regularly face disruptive and debilitating mental health challenges. As the author redescribes the aforementioned disorders, he also presents a theological examination of biblical principles to offer hope to persons who encounter such psychological suffering. Swinton's concluding chapter redescribes healing, encouraging readers to reimagine mental health in a more holistic manner. Overall, the book strives to reorient current paradigms of psychiatric care for Christians with mental health challenges. Swinton achieves this end not by dismissing current clinical practice, but by enhancing models of care through expanding the reader's understanding of what it means to be a human person faced with such debilitating disorders.

Though it offers a rich reexamination of mental health care, *Finding Jesus in the Storm* poses limitations. First, clarity to Swinton's research

methodology would strengthen the text. Since phenomenological studies provide rich insight into a small sample, readers must keep in mind the argument underlying *Finding Jesus in the Storm* is built off qualitative interviews with a limited number of participants. Second, readers from particular academic disciplines may push against the interdisciplinary nature of the book. For instance, those within the field of clinical psychology may argue against Swinton's depreciation of current trends in psychiatric care. Though he is careful not to dissuade his readers away from professional help, the text explicitly critiques the inadequacies of current practice. Likewise, those within the field of theology or biblical studies may find the extent of Swinton's exegesis of scripture lacking. Though Swinton's integration of the Bible and Christian praxis in responding to mental health challenges were comprehensive in nature, the text would be strengthened through a more focused engagement with the theology of mental health. Swinton might respond to such critiques insofar that his intent in offering guidance to Christians weathering debilitating storms of mental health is to be *descriptive* of their experience, while not offering a *normative* account universally experienced by such individuals.

Amidst potential limitations, *Finding Jesus in the Storm* offers helpful insights for student affairs professionals who encounter students with mental health challenges. Perhaps the three most salient themes interwoven throughout Swinton's work involve curating deeper empathy for mental health challenges, growing in epistemic generosity, and redescribing the nature of healing.

The very act of this book being written, is an act of tenderness and care. A strength to Swinton's voice as an author is tied to his deep empathy. Is not kindness and care some of the most fleeting human expressions when we as educators are tired, overworked, vexed, and responding to incredibly challenging student behavior? Readers would be wise to attend to Swinton's Christlike posture which models an attentiveness to the individual versus an attentiveness to distressing or debilitating behavior. For under the layers of mental distress, Swinton reminds us of the truth that all human persons "need love, belonging, and meaningful and purposeful existence" (p. 175).

Additionally, *Finding Jesus in the Storm* encourages readers to re-envision epistemic justice (p. 145). Building off the research of Miranda Fricker (2009), Swinton demonstrates an individual's credibility as a "knower" is deeply rooted within cultural value systems of what it means

to know. Hence, the experiences of individuals with mental health challenges are often “downgraded because of the way a particularly powerful cultural description negatively positions their experiences hermeneutically. Within such situations people tend to lose their voices...in a very literal social sense” (p. 146). In what ways do students lose their voice on campus? Might they deal inauthentically with their mental health as a means of conforming to dominant campus cultures? Swinton’s text cautions against the empty and naïve platitudes (p. 109), wherein listeners diminish or devalue the experiential knowledge of those who struggle maintaining mental health. In contrast, he articulates a vision of epistemic generosity which “allows for diversity of experience and counters the injustice of having negative identities forced upon us” (p. 150). As advocates of our student’s success, how might we reinforce their belonging to our campus communities by finding opportunities to generously account for their particular and unique ways of knowing?

A final contribution of *Finding Jesus in the Storm* is derived from redescribing the nature of health. Swinton cautions against the inadequate language surrounding curing mental illness (p. 205). When health is understood holistically and not reduced to a mere biological category or the absence of illness, it may be reimagined as human flourishing or the abundant life. Readers are reminded, “health is not the *absence* of anything; it is the *presence* of God” (p. 206). Swinton redescribes health as *shalom*, a category less concerned with one’s mental state and far more attentive to curating a right relationship with God. Individuals can lean into and pursue shalom regardless of experiencing debilitating psychological or physical capacities. It is within this right relationship with God that a fullness of health might be found. Per Swinton’s advice, how might student affairs professionals expand their definition of what it means to maintain psychological health? How might we lead students who encounter disorienting or disabling mental health challenges to find a renewed sense of hope? According to Swinton, we must encourage everyone towards true shalom, which “enables us to hold on to Jesus in the midst of the storms” (p. 206).

The overarching question of this book asks, “what does it mean to be a human person” (p. 1)? More specifically, Swinton explores, “what does it mean to be a human person who identifies as Christian while simultaneously suffering from a disruptive mental illness” (p. 3)? The answer to this question is multifaceted and layered with nuance. At its core, the field of student development is built on the same anthropologic

question. Hence, when we consider *what does it mean to be a human person who is enrolled in the complex environment of higher education*, we must grapple with how we'll practice care for those human persons who have the added strain of distressing mental health challenges. Readers will benefit from Swinton's reimagining of the human experience, as he calls us to deeper empathy, care, and understanding for the mentally diverse human populations of our campus.

Jeffrey Tabone serves as the Assistant Director of Programs and Student Formation of the John Wesley Honors College and Assistant Professor of Honors Humanities at Indiana Wesleyan University.

References

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