

BOOK REVIEW FOR ANZJP

Religion and Mental Health. John F Schumaker (ed). New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. ISBN 0-19-50685-4. pp.320. RRP \$69.95.

In stark contrast to William James' classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, an intricately layered celebration of the entwined psyche and soul of (wo)man, this collection of 24 chapters attempts to untangle the complex, perhaps inseparable relationship between religion and mental health by applying the methods of empirical analysis. While such a method has relevance in the domain of mental health, its validity is questioned by one contributor's acknowledgment of the 'impossibility of evaluating scientifically the truth of religious statements' (p33).

The 31 international experts - psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists - review the available research when scriptural, theological and empirical data is subjected to scientific evaluation. The four sections of the book, 'Historical Perspectives, Affective and Cognitive Consequences, Psychosocial Dimensions and Cross-Cultural Perspectives', include variably informative chapters.

The best chapters clearly define the impact of religion on mental health in children, women and the aged, marital adjustment, crime, delinquency, sexual adjustment, depression and suicide and substance abuse. The cross-cultural perspectives provided accounts of dissociation and possession states while the concept of anti-, ir- and a-religiosity added an important dimension to the patterns of counter-beliefs and its impact on mental health.

Despite repeated warnings about the inherent problems and limitations of definitions of 'religion' and 'mental health', some chapters persist to push the empirical approach beyond its limits, for example, by quoting 'effect sizes' derived from studies that examine the relationship between these poorly defined categories. Added to these problems are the sets of methodological flaws coupled with the personal bias in interpretation found in some chapters, all of which naturally leads one to question whether such empirical investigation is the most appropriate approach for a complex topic such as this.

This book certainly appears at a time of a major revival of interest in religion in general and in particular, as it applies to psychiatry. Sims (1994) has recently highlighted that psychiatrists' unwillingness to engage in the realm of religion and noted that the 'reluctance to use the word, the concept or the implications of *spiritual*, are like a patient with a phantom limb, denying the existence of their handicap' (p444).

Dr Schumaker clearly deserves credit for confronting the collision of consciousness that others avoid when they sever the psyche from the soul. Thus, the book responds to a need articulated by Sims (1994): 'For too long psychiatry has avoided the spiritual realm, perhaps out of ignorance, for fear of trampling on patients' sensibilities. This is understandable, but psychiatrists have neglected it at their patients' peril. We need to

evaluate the religious and spiritual experience of our patients in aetiology, diagnosis, prognosis and treatment' (p446).

At a conceptual level, however, the book fails to seriously grapple with the fundamental difficulties encountered in defining the relationship between mental health, self, society and Deity. Located between the canons of a narrowly defined science and the exoteric and esoteric subjective religious experiences, this well-referenced work approaches the limits of the psychosocial analysis of its subject, but shuns to acknowledge the essential dimension of the personal religious experience - love. The result is a book that, in keeping with the late-twentieth-century Western thought, bases its limited vision of social and religious philosophy and view of 'the nature of reality' on empiricism.

Yet, in the final analysis, the irreducible gap between the finitude of the human and the Infinity of the Divine remains an eternal mystery, beyond the realm of reason, infusing our consciousness with much awe and wonder. This book may offer something of wonderment, but unfortunately does not, like James' classic, evoke awe.

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Reference

Sims A. C. P. 'Psyche' - Spirit as well as Mind? *British Journal of Psychiatry* (1994), 165, 441-446.

