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BOOK REVIEWS

Mystery, Power and Danger

The Oxford handbook of psychology and spirituality, edited by Lisa J. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, £42, ISBN: 978-0-19-935734-5

The psychology of spirituality raises fascinating questions. The first one is: why is spirituality still located within the intellectual frame of the twenty-first century to the extent that merits a tome of this weight (physical and reputational)? The triumphs of science and technology over the last couple of hundred years that have transformed the ability of human beings to control their environment could have sounded the death knell for non-rational ways of thinking and experiencing. Certainly, there are those who believe that religion and spirituality should have been long since consigned to the bin of historical irrelevancies. Had their view prevailed, this book would not exist. However, it is evident even to the most confirmed sceptic that nothing could be further from the truth. Religion, not least in deviant and destructive forms, continues to hold sway in many parts of the globe, and spirituality maintains an enduring fascination.

Other questions concern the nature of the beast. Is spirituality simply a recreation, a de-stressor in the pressured modern world, a comfort in difficult times, a way of directing the gaze towards the bright side, towards love and light? This new age perspective certainly sells books, workshops, scented candles and crystals. Or is it, as most of the major religions would have it, the door to a transcendent reality of mystery, power and danger? To tackle this question takes the enquirer into the treacherous territory beyond what can be precisely known, into the realm of feeling, of relationship with that which is beyond; the sacred; the divine. It strays well beyond the boundaries of the self, into questions of non-locality of mind.

Then there is the moral dimension, almost invariably a component of religions, and, I would argue, the mark of an authentic spirituality. Where does that fit in? On the one side, a spirituality of loving relationship with the cosmos can be seen as the solution to the environmental catastrophe that over-reliance on technology faces us with. On the other, an individualistic, intra-psychic morality found in some religious traditions, and the sort of shallow spirituality caricatured above, is steering us rapidly in the opposite direction. Is spirituality the solution or the problem?

Then again, there is my particular interest in this book. My work as an NHS therapist had confronted me with the overlap between the experience of people who had acquired a diagnosis of chronic schizophrenia and the saints of the Christian contemplative tradition with which I was familiar through earlier study of medieval history. Received wisdom in the 1990s, when I started to look into this, stated that this apparent similarity was confusing and unfortunate, and the task was to find ways to distinguish the two. My own response was to explore the common basis for these anomalous experiences, whether described as mystical or psychotic, in brain organization (Clarke, 2008, 2010).

In my view, to bring the crucial issues of mind beyond brain and transcendence into a scientific frame requires recognition of the limited and fractured nature of human perception; valuing the spiritual dimension of this fractured perception has huge implications, related to justice, for those trapped in the mental health system, as well as furthering the psychological study of spirituality. Perhaps my expectations in approaching this volume were too high. I have to report that they were not fulfilled.

It will be apparent from my introduction that I did not approach my task as a reviewer with an open mind. Most chapters started with a definition of spirituality and these gave the first clue as to whether the writer was prepared to tackle the transcendent dimension offered by the subject, or whether they would remain firmly locked within the individual psyche. Most (but not all) contributors failed this test by privileging a source of meaning for the individual over a reaching out in relationship beyond the knowable, thus falling into the usual individualistic fallacy of conventional psychology. Perhaps this somewhat myopic gaze is inevitable as it is reasonable for such a volume to reflect the current status of the field of study.

The book makes it apparent that the psychology of spirituality has become something of a social science industry, churning out studies and no doubt doctorates and career progression in the process. Social scientific survey material makes up much of the book, and this will provide a mine of useful information and references for anyone in this field. The overall effect of reading the 20 or so chapters devoted to such study fails to deliver the expected banner headline, that spirituality is good for you. I consider this a plus as the results reflect the real diversity and complexity of the field. The overall conclusion could be summed up as follows: spiritual/religious people are happier and better adjusted unless they turn out to be more prejudiced and tormented by guilt. The studies are overwhelmingly from the US, and therefore of less relevance to the British scene.

There were some chapters that for me, coming at it from a different frame, stood out from this worthily amorphous mass. Schwartz and Dossey wrestle honestly with the methodological challenges and disappointments of prayer intention research. Comas-Diaz's powerful chapter is notable in its exposition of 'coloured spirituality' which covers trauma and the 'soul wounds' of oppressed peoples. She sets this in a context of shared consciousness, which I find heartening. David Lukoff was bound to catch my notice as he was writing about the overlap between psychosis and spirituality, with an emphasis on recovery, and valuing the transformative potential of psychosis. Relevant but missing was the recent research into the effect of the social construction of anomalous experiencing. This research provides powerful evidence that viewing such experiences, even distressing ones that impact adversely on functioning, in a spiritual framework of meaning, leads to reliably better outcomes than the ubiquitous, 'illness' explanation (e.g. Brett et al., 2007, 2009; Heriot-Maitland, Knight, & Peters, 2012). If taken seriously, these robust research findings would revolutionize 'psychosis treatment' to the immense benefit of service users.

Fudging transcendence

As stated in my introduction, I consider the transcendent, transpersonal dimension to be at once the most significant and interesting, and the most challenging aspect of spirituality. It is one I have grappled with (Clarke, 2008, 2010) and have come to the conclusion that there is an authentically psychological way into the real challenges of non-locality and transcendence, starting with recognition of the fallacy that our perceptions and experience of the world, on which the observations and conclusions of science are based, provide a straightforward map of what is. Philosophers (e.g. Kant) have long questioned this assumption, but this is not a philosophically sophisticated book. Where a scientific dilemma, as evidence of mind beyond the brain, is encountered, a physicalist explanation is sought, and what could be more physical than physics which is mysterious and incomprehensible to most psychologists, myself included? Quantum mechanics above all, with the help of certain popularizers, including Amit Goswami, who has a chapter here, promise the holy grail of being able to explain away everything – provided one does not spoil things by enquiring what this discipline has actually established.

I sought the help of a handy physicist (Chris Clarke, my husband, former maths professor who has published on quantum theory and consciousness, e.g. Clarke, 1995) in appraising the relevant chapters (4, 5, 36, 38). He pointed out that they represent inconclusive irrelevancies or popular misconceptions, radically at odds with the current academic consensus in physics and consciousness studies. Within this discourse, the word consciousness is hotly contested and most quantum physicists recognize no connection between their subject and consciousness anyway. Miller's introduction and conclusion rely uncritically on this supposedly miraculous combination of quantum physics and consciousness studies to declare that the circle of transcendence and non-locality has been squared.

The misguided search for a physical mechanism

This search for a mechanism to explain away mystery is part of a wider tendency to reduce the spiritual to the physical. Faced with an apparent chasm between experience (how can we know anything about spirituality except by experience?) and material science, a sort of panic sets in: a grasping after some concrete mechanism to explain everything in rational, scientific terms; to prove that there is no gap between the two ways of human knowing. The popularizers' view of quantum theory is of course perfect as it can be represented to have explained that matter is not material after all and everything is intangibly connected with everything else (only, unfortunately it isn't and it hasn't). Unless taken purely metaphorically, the way that energy is invoked in some healing practices, for instance, without any evidence of the existence of an actual, physical force, could be seen as another example of the rational way of knowing's unease when faced with the non-material power of relationship. Even Philip Pullman's idea of 'dust' for the spiritual in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy (Pullman, 1995) could be another example.

If only spirituality and transcendence can be recognized as relationship, along with acceptance that experience, including experience of relationship, is a valid way of knowing! If it can be recognized that this way of knowing is to be used alongside, not instead of, the rational in order to approach 'what is' – which is ultimately beyond our grasp – but it is precisely that 'beyond our grasp' that triggers the panic. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot, maybe 'humankind cannot bear very much intangibility'.

To return to the Oxford handbook, opportunities to engage the real issues, and to respect mystery, to recognize the limits of human knowing, prescribed by the limitations of our brains, are lost to this chimera of pseudo physics. Fraser Watts comes tantalizingly close to expounding what I consider is really going on in terms of two distinct ways of knowing, based on the vagaries of our brain wiring, when he refers to dual levels of cognitive processing, but without fully referencing, or elaborating; the neuroscience chapters concentrate on connecting experience with brain areas without stepping back and looking more holistically. Sadly, nothing is included of the mind beyond brain insights from the group analysis literature (Dalal, 1998). Group analysis has been grappling with the phenomenon of the 'group mind' for a long time, but their conclusions have remained stuck in their own academic silo. An honourable exception to this lack is Bruce Greyson's chapter on Near Death Experience research where the issue of non-locality is tackled honestly, and he reports reasonable evidence that a functioning brain may not be essential to higher mental processes.

Approach of the Epiphany Philosophers needed

Thus, in my opinion, this compendious volume, despite much worthy content, does little to increase the academic respectability of spirituality studies and remove them from the woolly

embrace of the New Age. I find myself musing how much we need, now, my mentors for approaching the wilder shores where science and religion/spirituality collide, the 'Epiphany Philosophers' (www.epiphanyphilosophers.org). This eccentric group of academics, scientists and philosophers, with a strong practical as well as theoretical interest in religion and spirituality, were based in Cambridge and active between the 1950s and 1994. Margaret Masterman (Braithwaite) and Dorothy Emmet were two of the leading lights, among others. It is timely to recall them, as a gathering is planned for early 2017 to mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of their journal, *Theoria to Theory*, and a website has been launched to keep their flame alive. The volume here being reviewed highlights the need for that flame to be reignited. At the same time as tackling fearlessly contentious subjects from parapsychology to mysticism and everything in between, no sloppy thinking or ill thought through half-truths got past these formidable academics. Association with the group influenced me and Chris in our youth, and their interest in directing an uncompromising, scientific beam at the murkier edges of the known has stayed with us, along with an intolerance for comfortingly fashionable fudge. Perhaps this background explains the critical spirit in which I approach what others would merely see as a worthy, if unexciting volume.

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How the Rich get Away with it

How did we get into this mess? Politics, equality, nature, by George Monbiot, London, Verso, 2016, 342 pp., £16.99 (hardback; paperback to be published March 2017), ISBN 978-1-78478-362-4

'Oh dear! Another great book that nobody apart from the already-converted will read.' That was my reaction on reading the Introduction to this collection of short articles. If you are a *Guardian* reader, you will probably have read most of them already; if you are not, then you may be in for a surprise. Having read two of his previous books (*Heat*, 2006 and *Feral*, 2013), I had George