

# **'Ten Lectures on Psychotherapy and Spirituality'**

**Edited by Nathan Field**

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Reviewed by Dr. Andrew Powell

This is an unusual and interesting book. Nathan Field, as well contributing himself, has brought together a total of ten papers (eight of which have respondents) by well-established psychotherapists and in one case, a religious scholar, to explore how psychotherapists think about spirituality, what it is, and how does it inform psychotherapeutic practice. The psychotherapy described here is broadly analytical in approach, the authors being, (in chapter order) Rosemary Gordon, David Black, Kenneth Wright, Nathan Field himself, Ron Britten, Andrew Samuels, Donald Meltzer, Chris McKenna, Josephine Klein and Karen Armstrong. There are some 'big hitters' here.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the views expressed are all highly individual, even idiosyncratic, and therein lies both the strength and weakness of the book. It is what it says on the cover, ten lectures first given at a series of talks held at the London Centre for Psychotherapy. There is no unifying strand to take the reader from one point of view to another. Perhaps it would have been unrealistic to hope for this, because in what the authors understand to be spirituality they come from such different stables. Some reach out and try to engage the reader. Others make position statements with a more dogmatic feel about them. Some have a lovely simplicity. Others are heavy on metapsychology. Some contributors try to explain what they mean by spirituality and others don't try.

Contributors I would single out for their clarity and thoughtfulness in this admittedly difficult area are Rosemary Gordon, Nathan Field, Andrew Samuels, Chris MacKenna and, of course, Karen Armstrong, a former nun who is widely appreciated for her writings on religion.

I am sure readers will find themselves challenged, for spirituality is no anodyne. Rather, it is controversial, and should be so. Inevitably, some chapters 'spoke' to me more than others, which highlights just how individual a thing is our understanding of spirituality. Having said that, the way spirituality is generally discussed in this book is more sideways-on than head-on. The advantage lies in these therapists engaging with the subtle implications of spirituality as it is constellated in the analytic arena and for this, these essays stand out as daring compared with most psychoanalytical papers, which don't usually concern themselves much with 'spirituality', or else tend to see it as a flight from pain.

A further advantage is that these psychotherapists, the Jungians among them not least, are highly sensitive to the emotional context in which spiritual concerns are voiced, and are undeterred by the legacy of Freud's antipathy to the mystical, (a view which unhappily has been reinforced by pathological religiosity occurring in mental illness).

On the other hand, transpersonal psychotherapists may be left somewhat frustrated by the cautious soundings of the authors. Transpersonal approaches take the bull by the horns and 'go' with the patient directly into the arena of spiritual concern, for example, the existential plight of someone who is out of touch with their soul impulse, or when projections are not to be taken as metaphor but as energy transfers that are palpable and that can be as harmful as bullets from a gun. Accordingly, in contrast with Freud's view of consciousness as being bounded by the world of sense-perception, transpersonal therapists are prepared and ready for work with a 'higher' consciousness or Self, one that transcends empirical reality and, indeed, the very bounds of this life as we ordinarily know it.

I believe psychotherapy always to be a spiritual vocation, whether or not spirituality explicitly ever becomes a focus of therapy, but institutionally each school has acquired something of the character of a religious order. There are numerous doctrinal differences and there is certainly 'High' and 'Low' Church. In the psychoanalytic community, which has been compared with the Vatican, this book caused a stir, and certainly the issues raised here highlight the need to temper reductionism (on which interpretations rest) with the search for wholeness of being of an emergent self.

For me, the most interesting aspect of the book lies in the self-portraits drawn by the contributors as they talk, whether directly or obliquely, about their beliefs and values, rather than attempting new kinds of formulation that might conjoin mind and spirit. But then, any such formulation risks entrapping spirit, and it is arguable that entrapping spirit is as bad as denying it. Perhaps we should be content to see 'through a glass darkly' and hold in reverence and anticipation what we find there.

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