

Is Faith Delusion? Why Religion is Good for Your Health.

Professor Andrew Sims

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Book Review by Dr. Jennifer Barraclough

Andrew Sims will be known to many readers as a former Professor of Psychiatry in the University of Leeds, a past President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the author of a classic text on descriptive psychopathology. He is also a committed Christian whose faith is central to his life and work. In *Is Faith Delusion?* he proclaims 'one of medicine's best-kept secrets' – the evidence that religious belief and spirituality have 'overwhelmingly positive' effects.

This is really a book about the interface between Christianity and psychiatry, rather than the general review of connections between spirituality and health which its title, – a rejoinder to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* – would suggest. Sims selects the themes of relationship, love, grace, prayer, control, harmony, belonging, forgiveness, sin, reconciliation, hope and meaning as especially relevant to those with mental illness. He stresses the importance of taking a spiritual and religious history from patients, of respecting their beliefs when offering therapeutic interventions, and of a values-based approach to medical practice.

Sims examines the reasons for the mutual hostility, misunderstanding and distrust between psychiatry and the Church, which has existed through many periods of history. The standard psychiatric textbook of the 1960s dismissed religion as the refuge of the neurotic, and present-day psychiatrists remain less likely to believe in God, or to follow a religious practice, than either their patients or the general population. However, since the 1980's the climate has been changing and spirituality has become an acceptable topic for discussion and research. There follows a review of research approaches and Sims outlines a number of the scientific disciplines that are relevant to psychiatry. He touches on philosophical considerations such as the limits of self-responsibility, and the balance between determinism and free will. He concludes that there is no essential conflict between science and faith when the boundaries of their individual realms are not transgressed while cautioning against 'simplistic reductionism' and 'dogma' on either side.

The majority of published studies have shown religious commitment to be advantageous for both mental and physical health. It appears to protect against some psychiatric conditions, in particular depression, and in cases where mental illness has already developed, it can provide comfort and support. One likely reason for these benefits is that membership of a church encourages a regular

lifestyle and provides a social network; another is that spiritual feelings such as optimism and compassion are correlated with up-regulation of the immune system. There can also be negative effects, for example, when prayer is used as a substitute for medical treatment, or religious teachings are interpreted in a way that adds to the burden of guilt for depressed patients.

There is a detailed section devoted to the author's special interest of descriptive psychopathology. He concludes that, although delusions may have a religious content, religious faith does not fulfil the criteria for delusion; that those who 'hear the voice of God' are not hallucinated; and nor is the experience of 'God within' a passivity experience.

While most of the text is well supported by references to the academic literature, parts are coloured by personal beliefs of a kind that not everyone would accept. For example, to quote from the chapter on 'Inner and Outer Demons': 'Demons are the personification of the powers of evil. The *truth* in Christ removes these powers altogether, thereby removing the very existence of these demons, showing them to be lies of the Devil'. Readers of different faiths, and those with no faith, may find it difficult to relate to statements such as these. There is no attempt to cover other religious traditions, and the few comments about 'New Age' approaches to spirituality seem rather dismissive, although these in fact share many principles in common with Christianity.

The usefulness of this book for clinical psychiatrists could have been enhanced by a more concise presentation; by inclusion of additional detailed case studies; and by practical consideration of how spiritual aspects of patient care, staff support and liaison with clergy can be organized within a mental health service. Overall, however, it is an impressively thoughtful, heartfelt and wide-ranging treatise that will be of interest to those from a range of professional backgrounds and to reflective general readers.

Dr. Jennifer Barraclough, formerly Consultant in Psychological Medicine, Churchill Hospital, Oxford and now Bach Foundation Registered Practitioner, Auckland, New Zealand. email jennifer.barraclough@gmail.com
web www.jenni.co.nz