

Spirituality and Counselling - Experiential and theoretical perspectives

Eds: Moore, J and Purton, C
PCCS Books, Ross-on-Wye, 2006, 310pp, p/b ISBN 10-1-898059-74-8

Book Review by the Reverend Professor Chris Cook

Spirituality is increasingly being recognised as an important consideration in theory, practice and research in all areas of mental healthcare. Exactly what is meant by spirituality isn't always clarified or agreed. Indeed, there are those who would clearly prefer to dispense with the concept altogether. But somehow discussion around the themes of transcendence, relationship, meaning and purpose, as well as other concepts perceived to be related to spirituality, seems to keep on coming up.

In July 2004 a conference was convened for counsellors, psychotherapists and other professionals at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, under the title of 'The spiritual dimension in therapy and experiential exploration'. This book emerged from that conference. It comprises 22 contributions from 28 contributors, including a former archbishop, a Buddhist monk, several theologians, and a professor of philosophy. Humanist and Buddhist perspectives are presented alongside those from the Christian tradition. The majority of contributors, however, are counsellors, and most are European. The Person-Centred approach of Carl Rogers appears to be the almost ubiquitous model of theory and practice in counselling. The Christian tradition is the predominant perspective on theology and spirituality.

What may be said about the Christian-Rogerian hegemony that emerges in this anthology? As a Christian, but not a Rogerian counsellor, I guess I have mixed feelings. However, the enthusiasm of these authors for an understanding of something that takes place in the relationship between counsellor and counselee which goes beyond the secular and scientific, even if at times that something is not easily located in traditional faith or theoretical perspectives, is engaging and stimulating. There is plenty of food for thought in the virtual conversation that takes place in the pages of this book.

Some of the individual contributions are also highly thought provoking, ranging from the seriously philosophical, to the artistic and creative. Hans Julius Schneider, for example, engages with the philosophy of William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein as providing different interpretations of the phenomena of religious experience. He argues that Wittgenstein offers a way of understanding religious language as meaningful without there being any need to engage in fruitless discussions about whether or not God 'exists'. The inclusiveness of this attempt to reframe the debate about spirituality helpfully points out that all human beings are spiritual, even if some might be relatively unaware of what goes on in the spiritual dimension of their lives. But the assertion that it does not matter whether or not a transcendent reality objectively exists will surely ring false with many readers who identify with particular faith traditions, and especially perhaps any who are not philosophically inclined.

In contrast, the book includes some beautiful colour plates as illustrations of the chapter by Mary Hill and Suzanne Keys, describing the workshop that they offered on the theme of 'Longing in practice: Prayer and therapy', and a lovely poem by Tess Sturrock which explains (believe it or not) why there is a pink page in the middle of the book! This experiential dimension to the book is also nicely illustrated by some reflections by Mary Green and Stephen Platten on cathedrals as places of inner/spiritual discovery; an especially appropriate contribution to the written proceedings of a conference which concluded with a period of silent meditation in Norwich Cathedral.

This book will surely become a key point of reference for counsellors interested in spirituality, not to mention those who would like to explore the concept of spirituality from a counselling perspective. It is very positive, albeit the cost of this is perhaps the failure to engage more seriously with arguments against the value of spirituality as an informative concept in the field of counselling. It is very broad, albeit a number of the world's major faith traditions and models of counselling are almost entirely absent. It is very inclusive, albeit there are many points of view to which a reader might reasonably take exception. However, it is most of all very engaging and is grounded in the experience of its participants in counselling practice and in spiritual reflection. This makes it a most valuable and stimulating contribution to the literature on spirituality and counselling.