

'Faith and Mental Health: Religious Resources for Healing'

by Professor Harold G. Koenig

Philadelphia. Templeton Foundation Press, 2005, 352 pages.

Review by Rev. Professor Chris Cook

In this scientific age, can religion tell us anything about mental illness? There are, of course, many possible answers to that question. Some people reduce faith to a mere psychological variable, while others reconstruct mental illness in purely religious terms. Harold Koenig, publisher of *Science & Theology News* and a leading authority on religion-and-health, recognizes both the positive and the negative answers found in objective research and within popular perceptions. In *Faith & Mental Health*, Koenig does not avoid the challenges religion encounters in both providing service and conducting research, but he offers a positive evaluation of the use of religion in healing those suffering from mental disorders.

As a description of the scientific intersection of faith and mental health, this book cannot be faulted. Scientists should be impressed by its objectivity, rigor and comprehensiveness and clinicians should be pleased to find that it is also highly compassionate. Koenig admits, however, that his book is 'light on theology,' and as a theologian, I long to see greater theological engagement with the issues it raises. The description of 'faith-integrated' approaches in faith-based organizations was especially tantalizing. What does it mean - scientifically and theologically - to integrate theological principles into psychological treatments? How can we come to a theological understanding of "secular" treatments? And how, for example, might Islamic, Jewish and Christian theologies of treatment differ?

This book is organized into four easily digested sections that seamlessly combine the practical and the academic. Koenig first offers a historical review, citing examples of religious individuals and communities caring for the mentally ill around the world. The second part of the book provides a scholarly but accessible review of hundreds of published studies on religion and mental illness - an overview that by itself makes the book worth reading. The next segment considers the role of faith-based organizations in mental health care. Though this section provides numerous real-life examples, I was a bit disappointed that all the cases Koenig describes are from North America. The book ends with the key barriers to research and health care service, such as: lack of adequate research training and methodology, unfocused and unprioritised research, inadequate funding, and over-regulation of services. Koenig explores some possible solutions, but it is clear that there are currently more questions than answers.

This book should be required reading for anyone working in the mental-health field, and I especially hope that research-funding bodies will take its implications for the future seriously.

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