

Book Review by Dr Andrew Clark

'Sadness, Depression and the Dark Night of the Soul:

Transcending the Medicalisation of Sadness'

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Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2017

This book is a detailed personal account of the author's remarkable social anthropological study of a group of lay theological students, priests, and contemplative monks and nuns in Spain. All 57 participants were practising Catholics living out their vocations in an increasingly secular Spanish culture.

The study had five stated aims:

- 1) To provide rich anthropological data on the participants and their contexts.
- 2) To understand how these participants differentiated between normal but profound sadness and pathological sadness, i.e. depression.
- 3) To investigate the coping strategies used by participants when experiencing either normal profound sadness or depression.
- 4) To explore how the participants supported other people suffering sadness or depression, what training they had in this area and how they collaborated with mental health professionals.
- 5) To propose a framework for distinguishing pathological from normal deep sadness.

In pursuing these aims, the author gives a personal and personable account of her research. In her preface, she writes, 'I would like you to think of it [the book] as a sort of diary of my travels, a witness to my experiences and to the lessons I learned along the way.' This is indeed how I experienced reading the book – I had a sense of journeying alongside the author in her study.

The book is divided into three sections. Each section and, within each section, each of the chapters, is clearly introduced so that the reader has a good sense of what each part of the unfolding narrative will cover.

Section 1 sets out the literary and historical context to the study, including an overview of the author's previous population studies in Spain. Chapter 1 provides a helpful review of the literature on the medicalisation of sadness and help-seeking behaviour in people experiencing profound sadness or depression, as well as the literature comparing the clinical concept of depression with the process of spiritual transformation captured in the phrase 'Dark Night of the Soul'. Chapter 2 offers a comprehensive review of the literature concerning the role of clergy in mental health care, including a thoughtful discussion of the similarities and differences between spiritual direction, confession and psychotherapy. Chapter 3 provides an interesting overview of the state of the Catholic Church and clergy in Spain in the early 21st century, as well as the place of women in the Catholic Church. To help the reader understand the context of the participating contemplative nuns from the Order of Saint Augustine and the Cistercian monks, the chapter concludes with an informative introduction to the Augustinian and Cistercian monastic traditions.

Section 2 is, by some distance, the longest section of the book, comprising 185 pages. These pages give a detailed account of the themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews, which the author conducted with each participant. The four chapters cover, in turn, the first four study aims. Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of the participants, which allows the reader to get a sense of the lives they lead. Chapter 5 sets out the responses of the participants to questions about how they conceptualised sadness and depression. A key theme here is the notion that normal profound sadness was seen as an understandable response to the adversities of life, whereas pathological depression somehow made no sense, echoing the distinction, popular in psychiatry 30 years ago, between reactive and endogenous depression. The dark night of the soul was understood by participants as an invitation from God to mature in one's spiritual life, and was seen as clearly distinct from pathological depression. A key distinguishing feature was that in general, people undergoing the dark night of the soul maintained a sense of hope and were not troubled by self-destructive thoughts, in contrast to those suffering from pathological depression. Chapter 6 described the participants' ways of coping and help-seeking when enduring deep sadness or depression, with much emphasis placed on the role of prayer. Chapter 7 sets out the participants' views on helping others with sadness or depression. A lack of training in mental health as well as time constraints were notable barriers to this. Participants were generally wary of psychiatrists, who they perceived as anti-religious and liable to devalue the role of religious resources and practices in a person's care. To many participants, the idea of a psychiatrist that was sympathetic to people's spirituality seemed an anathema.

Section 3 is the shortest section and probably the most valuable for the jobbing psychiatrist. Chapter 8 revisits the medicalisation of sadness and the problem of decontextualising depressive symptoms. Drawing lessons from the findings of her study, the author makes the important point that enabling a person who is experiencing profound sadness or depression to find some meaning in their suffering helps to reduce the associated stigma. Chapter 9 reflects on the sense of purpose, trust, belonging and self-worth derived from the faith and religious practices of the participants, which led to resilience in the face of adversity. This is seen to be consistent with previous literature on the relationship between religious practices and mental health. Chapter 10 explores the relationship between clergy and psychiatrists and the question of what makes a good priest and a good psychiatrist. The need for more training for clergy in mental health is highlighted. The final chapter offers a practical framework for distinguishing deep sadness from clinical depression. The author advocates a focus on three particular areas in the clinical encounter to help with this distinction: context, functioning and risk. If the person's sadness makes sense within the context of their life, if their functioning is minimally impaired and their risk low, then the clinical picture is more likely to be one of deep sadness. In such circumstances, the emphasis should be on psychosocial support, including where appropriate spiritual support, rather than medication.

The book is a relatively long read. It is scholarly and well referenced. Many psychiatrists who appreciate the importance of contextualising mental health symptoms will be interested in sections 1 and 3. Spiritual directors, clergy with an interest in mental health and psychotherapists with an interest in spirituality will also find much of value in these sections. The detailed account of the research findings described in section 2 will be of more interest to the specialist researcher or to those who would like to get a personal feel of the process of social anthropological research in mental health. In his foreword, Professor Roland Littlewood says that this book is 'not, of course, a plea for 'more religion' but it is a plea for more context, more understanding and more empathy.' The book makes this plea with clarity and with heart.