

Review Article

ENLARGING THE INTERDISCIPLINARY CIRCLE: JOAN KOSS-CHIOINO'S AND PHILIP HEFNER'S APPROACH TO SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION AND HEALING

by K. Helmut Reich

Abstract. In the current scientific age there exists in academia a certain reservation regarding, even a fear of contact with, controversial issues such as faith healing or shamanism or even spiritual transformation. Although classical medicine, neurobiology, and possibly even social circumstances and forces are recognized, researching the controversial issues evoked may be frowned upon and even be risky for one's academic career. Fortunately, Joan Koss-Chioino, Philip Hefner, and their colleagues (anthropologists, artists, neuroscientists, physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, theologians, and others) have not shrunk from doing so. The result, reviewed here in some detail, goes beyond what is common knowledge and points the way to further beneficial insights via open-minded interdisciplinary research.

Keywords: anthropology; Christianity; clinical experiences; healing; interdisciplinarity; neuroscience; psychology; religion; research methodology; science and religion; shamanism; spiritual transformation; theology

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Spiritual Transformation and Healing: Anthropological, Theological, Neuroscientific, and Clinical Perspectives. Edited by JOAN D. KOSS-CHIOINO and PHILIP HEFNER. Lanham, Md: AltaMira, 2006. xxvii + 300 pages. \$29.95 (paper).

This enriching, daring volume divides into five parts: I—Finding Our Way through New Terrain (chaps. 1–3); II—Traditional and Indigenous Healing Systems: Anthropological Perspectives (chaps. 4–7); III—Spiritual Transformation and Healing from Religious Perspectives (chaps. 8–11); IV—Neuroscientific Perspectives on Spiritual Transformation and Healing (chaps. 12–14); V—Clinical Perspectives on Spiritual Transformation and Healing (chaps. 15–16). Given this richness, a somewhat uneven treatment of the sixteen chapters is inevitable in a brief review such as this.

A WALK THROUGH THE VOLUME

After a foreword by Solomon H. Katz and a preface by Ralph W. Hood Jr., the editors explore fundamental issues. The volume is based on the assumption that “spiritual transformation is a universal potential of human life and a central element in the actions and interactions of the healing process” (p. 3). The aim of the book is “to reach beyond the existing literature” (p. 4). The editors do not define *spiritual transformation* as to be understood throughout but leave it to readers to evolve their own view after having been acquainted with the definitions used by various contributors. The perspectives on spiritual transformation and healing are detailed from those of the behavioral/social sciences, religious traditions and practices, neuroscience, and clinical experiences (pp. 5–7). The related issues are delineated, specifically concerning methodology in an age when modern science and many scientists hold that the beliefs and world-views of persons experiencing spiritual healing “are not tenable” (p. 8), referring each time to the relevant chapter. The exploratory nature of the volume is underscored.

Psychologist Kenneth I. Pargament discusses the meaning of spiritual transformation, with *spirituality* defined as the search for the sacred. Specifically, transformation is not doing more of the same, nor does it refer to statistically significant changes, but it concerns a fundamental change in the place of the sacred in the life of the individual—which can be life-affirming or destructive (pp. 17–18).

Multidisciplinary scholar David J. Hufford and artist/ethnographer Mary Ann Bucklin describe and analyze the spirit of spiritual healing in the United States both historically and currently. Specifically, they note the connection between *spiritual* and *spirits* and the rise of the public’s interest in spiritual concerns. In contrast, neither theology nor science is said to take up these concerns adequately. The authors argue that no one should dis-

tort the facts of ordinary belief and experience if a better understanding is to be achieved. The idea that belief in spiritual transformation and healing cannot be held by the enlightened contemporary mainstream is contradicted by a wealth of empirical data.

Anthropologist and psychiatrist Joan Koss-Chioino holds forth on spiritual transformation and radical empathy in ritual healing and therapeutic relationships. She defines spiritual transformation with Katz as “dramatic changes in world and self views, purposes, religious beliefs, attitudes or behavior” (p. 47). Spirit work is said to be based “on the emergence of an intersubjective space where individual differences are melded into one field of feeling and experience shared by healer and sufferer” (p. 50). Such radical empathy takes empathic behavior beyond what is expected from psychotherapists of other schools—apart from some psychoanalysts who come close—and takes the healer across a wide and deep emotional spectrum. Koss-Chioino describes the core elements of ritual healing, the required aptitudes of healers, and the initiation to their work.

Anthropologists Bonnie Glass-Coffin and Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer describe field studies on shamanic healing in Peru and Siberia, respectively. These are the raw materials of the volume, which need to be acknowledged, studied, analyzed, and explained theoretically.

Anthropologist Edith L. B. Turner writes about the making of a shaman in her comparative study of Inuit, African, and Nepalese shaman initiation. Healers’ initiations are not planned for them by society; they fall into their initiations, which “are bestowed by spirit agencies” (p. 102). The details of this (painful) experience are precise and similar in all the cases presented here in much detail. The author presents facts about the mystery of the permeability of humans by each other and by spirits.

Lutheran theologian Philip Hefner deals with spiritual transformation and healing as encounter with the sacred. *Health* and *healing* are polysemic terms—they involve a physical and a transcendental spiritual meaning. The same goes for *spirit* and *spiritual*, as notably explained by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: “The sensate deals with what *is*, the spiritual deals with what *could be*. . . . Spirituality refers to the organization of our consciousness that makes richness of life possible, for individuals and communities” (p. 124). This state of affairs calls for a bifocal methodology that integrates materialist functional interpretations with phenomenological presentations of overbelief (p. 125). “The power of the sacred at work in human lives is neither tame nor manageable nor manipulable: it cannot be called forth at will, and it cannot be banished from experience by a simple word” (p. 129).

Philosopher and religionist Karl E. Peters discusses spiritual transformation and healing in light of evolutionary theology. The sacred is the source of existence. Evolutionary theology is both historically oriented and a form of process thought about the becoming of the world. The divine

spirit is conceived as a set of interactions that are creative. Health implies a balance between our self and our own body, our relationships with others and with the transcendent. Disease drives us from equilibrium, but even then spiritual transformation can improve the situation, providing a new identity.

Psychologist and Anglican priest Fraser Watts provides perspectives from psychology and Christianity on personal transformation. This includes a differentiation between views ranging from B. F. Skinner to C. G. Jung and comparing and contrasting them with examples of healing from the biblical Gospels. Watts shows that sharp differences commonly assumed between relevant secular and religious approaches such as focusing on the long maturing versus the rapid fruition of transformation, or making secular versus religious attributions, are partly misconceived. *Forgiveness* is thematized also to continue the examination of the two approaches to personal transformation in an enlightening context. Here, as before, both approaches could learn more from each other than is as yet the case. Continuing with personal transformation, Watts explains the important role of understanding and retelling the personal story.

Carol Rausch Albright, using approaches from neuropsychology and developmental theory, deals with faith as dynamic process involving notably spiritual growth, cognition, and complexity. She suggests that spiritual growth can be understood scientifically in terms of self-organization, complexity, and emergence. She brings in James Fowler's theory of faith development, neuroscience, and complexity theory and their trial integration to explain the workings of her suggestion, all geared to the foreknowledge of the nonspecialist.

Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg tackles the neurobiology of spiritual transformation. For him, the study of spiritual transformation is ultimately the study of complex mental processes, offering a window on several related phenomena. Newberg presents the relevant neuronal data and tentatively integrates them into a comprehensive neurochemical model.

Biochemist and neuroscientist Michael L. Spezio's theme is "Narrative in Holistic Healing: Empathy, Sympathy, and Simulation Theory." He emphasizes the intersubjective exchange in the practice of healing, which allows spiritual transformation of both the health seeker and the healer, leading to authentic minding (= radical empathy) via intersubjective narrative. Spezio explains in detail for nonspecialists the meaning of this summary including simulation theory and other theories of brain functioning.

Neuropsychologist and counselor David Allen Hogue considers "Healing of the Self-in-context: Memory, Plasticity, and Spiritual Practice." He sees a critical role for religion in support of spiritual development and transformation via community support and metanarratives helpful for the reinterpretation of personal stories. He details these various ingredients in a manner understandable to nonspecialists. He attaches importance to the

belief in a resurrected body because it is congruent with the contemporary understanding of the soul as embodied.

Psychiatrist and psychologist Gail Ironson, medical researcher Heidemarie Kremer, and psychologist Dale S. Ironson study how HIV transforms individuals' lives. Their three concerns are the role of spirituality and religion in such cases, the kinds of spiritual transformation reported by the 95 persons interviewed, and the forms of relevant spiritual experiences and ensuing changes. The authors provide much information and discuss how and to what extent spirituality and religion can help people to deal with HIV, not shunning the evocation of a possible negative outcome (such as hopelessness).

Psychologist Jean L. Kristeller and Lutheran pastoral theologian Leonard M. Hummel extend the book's theme to cancer patients, concentrating specifically on the experience of the patient and the role of the physician. Eighty to ninety percent of cancer patients report drawing on spiritual and religious resources, albeit not always with positive results. As to oncologists bringing up spiritual issues during a ten-minute office visit, this is rather rare, and easier "if the patient brings it up first." However, patients may prefer that "the doctor mentions it first" (p. 268). The authors have devised a model (OASIS—Oncologist Assisted Spirituality Intervention Study) of how physicians can address spiritual issues with patients in as little as five to six minutes and have found it to be accepted positively by physicians and their patients. Kristeller and Hummel illustrate these findings by case examples and deepen them theoretically.

DISCUSSION

It is this reviewer's opinion that the volume under discussion arrives at the right time and deals with the right topics, largely in the right manner. To justify this statement, a tour d'horizon is required.

Despite a remarkable numerical upswing in recent years, science-and-religion studies have hardly led to a major breakthrough in the understanding of the respective roles of science and religion, their ontological status, and their mutual relation. Condensing Neil Spurway's observation in a recent review (2006, 14), a fear is that it all gets repetitive. According to some old hands, the great twentieth-century themes, especially from the interface with physics, seem to have been essentially argued out: on the block universe versus time's thermodynamic arrow, the anthropic principle versus the multiverse, or the two kinds of indeterminacy (quantum and chaotic) and their implications for free will and divine action, the respective protagonists seem to have agreed to disagree. Biology in turn has been recognized for its moral challenges, both practical (in medicine, bioethics, and ecology) and from straightforward observation (the horrors of competition and of predatory behavior), but no agreed forward path

exists. As for evolution, no one can silence the creationists, but the proper answers to them had already been given in the nineteenth century. Details of the challenges from neuroscience and from mainstream psychology are still in flux, but there again the respective positions are divided and at times more or less confrontational.

That is the one side of the coin: no consensus within the “family.” Notwithstanding Edward O. Wilson’s new book (2006), we have on the other side of the coin the entrenchment and the intensity of the struggle with the “opposition”—as witnessed, for instance, at the November 2006 meeting on “Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason and Survival” at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California.¹ Why is this an important event in our context? Clearly, it was a meeting not just of everyday participants but of leading scientists, philosophers, and others who put forward many elaborated, impressive, sometimes original arguments against and for religion that were and are appreciated by many listeners and readers. So, why not simply acknowledge as unrestrictedly positive what is traditionally the way forward to better insights, and rejoice?

At issue here is not whose view is right and whose is wrong, or whether the language used sometimes was helpful or even admissible, but whether the meeting was genuinely productive in the sense of furthering insights from science-and-religion studies and debates. I have some doubts in that regard because such productivity calls for conditions that did not seem to be met to a sufficient degree—open minds, intense listening to all arguments and taking them in, carefully assessing them, (partially) accepting or rejecting new arguments on a quality basis, pursuing genuine interdisciplinary collaboration, and, above all, examining the evidence carefully and without bias. Not meeting the last condition is what appears to be a striking trend of the La Jolla kind of debate. The refusal by certain of Galileo’s adversaries to look through his telescope at the four satellites of Jupiter is rightly judged to be counterproductive for a forward-going dialogue. In my opinion, the same can be said about a refusal to look at the evidence, for example, for spiritual healing and a corresponding “empathy field” or even for scopaeesthesia—the detection of being stared at (Sheldrake 2005)—and a corresponding “consciousness field.” An example from another domain of the damaging effect of such an attitude is the refusal by certain anthropologists and economists to accept that culture matters when studying the state of affairs in their respective domains (Huntington and Harrison 2000).

How can one get out of such a situation? Proven ways include enlarging the mental horizon, coming at the problem from a different direction, using a new method, and above all including “new” material. This is exactly what the editors of this volume have done. They have included reports on traditional and indigenous (shamanic) healing in Peru and Siberia and on the making of a shaman in Inuit country, Africa, and Nepal, and

brought in anthropologists, artists, neuroscientists, physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, theologians, and others to debate various issues of spiritual transformation and healing in a way understandable to nonspecialists. Thus, merits of this volume from the perspective under discussion are unbiased dealing with themes not infrequently shunned in academia, doing it in an interdisciplinary way, and expressing the results in a manner understandable to nonexperts. This already recommends reading these works in their entirety to all who look for ways to move the science-and-religion dialogue forward from the current unsatisfactory situation.

WHAT IS MISSING

What might readers wish for that they do not get? In addition to the theoretical frames provided (radical empathy; evolutionary theology; a comprehensive neurochemical model of the mind-brain; spiritual growth as self-organization, complexity, and emergence; simulation theory), readers might have liked to hear about research to the effect that mind and spirit are not exclusively a function of the brain (for example, Hondrich 2006; Hunt 2006; Sheldrake 2005; Strawson 2006). More immediately, readers might wish to have seen the provided theoretical frames (and others) applied to the shamanic healing reported in chaps. 5 and 6—as is done, for instance, from a psychological perspective by Charles and Ronnie Blakeney and K. Helmut Reich (2005) concerning healing of alcoholics and drug addicts via spiritual development, or by Eckhart Straube (2005) in regard to spiritual healing by modern shamans, or by Wesley Wildman and Leslie Brothers (1999) concerning religious experience. Can we hope for a second volume that would tackle such step-by-step linking of empirical observations and their theoretical explanations in the same open-minded and interdisciplinary manner as characterizes the present one, given that the full acceptance of empirical facts often comes about when they can be explained satisfactorily? And could there be also a stronger plea for studying these issues more actively in academia (such as in Walach and Reich 2005)?

Notwithstanding these remarks, I can recommend without reservation *Spiritual Transformation and Healing* because it is rich, clear, and thought-provoking and goes beyond existing literature.

NOTE

1. Consulting Google or another Internet search engine on “Salk Institute November 2006 meeting on religion” will rapidly provide information on what went on and how the protagonists see each other and are viewed by the public.

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