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## Review of Richards & Bergin's "A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy"

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**A spiritual strategy for counseling  
and psychotherapy**

P.S. RICHARDS & A.E. BERGIN  
Washington, DC, American  
Psychological Association,  
1997, 391 pp. £31.95 (hb),  
ISBN 1 55798 434 4

Today's professional psychology, with its increasingly friendly stance toward religion and spirituality, needs resources to promote responsible interventions. P. Scott Richards and Allen E. Bergin, two leading researchers in the area of religious issues in psychotherapy, have authored an important book for counsellors and psychologists. As further evidence of the changing Zeitgeist in professional psychology, the book is published by the American Psychological Association.

*A Spiritual Strategy* is divided into

four main sections. The first section, comprised of the introductory chapter, is a brief apologetic for religious and spiritual sensitivity in psychotherapy. The authors note the ubiquity of religious faith among the general public and the relevance of spiritual resources for promoting change. Wisely, they manage to advocate a post-modern inclusion of religious issues in psychotherapy without completely dismantling the scientific modernism that continues to define the prevalent epistemological assumptions of the field.

The second section of the book, titled 'Foundations', includes four chapters of relevant historical and metaphysical considerations. Richards and Bergin first describe the long-standing alienation between psychology and religion, providing a helpful table that contrasts the philosophical assumptions of modernism and theism (this is one of many helpful summary tables throughout the book). They then go on to describe the newly emerging *Zeitgeist*, where religion is no longer associated with neurosis and is often viewed as a positive resource for change. The authors suggest the field is moving away from reductionistic understandings of the person toward multidimensional, multicultural understandings, including an awareness of religious and spiritual factors. In the fourth chapter, still part of the Foundations section, the authors provide a helpful analysis and summary of the three major metaphysical worldviews: naturalism, idealism of freedom, objective idealism. This chapter provides an excellent introduction to comparative religion for psychologists. The authors acknowledge the risk of oversimplifying and categorizing while again providing helpful summary tables. In the final chapter of the Foundations section they provide a theistic view of personality and mental health. Though the authors recognize

some risk in embracing both modern and post-modern epistemologies, they attempt to do so as they propose an eclectic, multidimensional view of personality which they title 'theistic realism' (as contrasted with classical or critical realism). They generally make a strong case for theistic realism, but may undermine their arguments a bit by spending too much time discussing anecdotal accounts of near-death experiences in an effort to provide evidence of a Deity. The authors appear to be more compelled by these anecdotes than a typical reader may be. Finally, they suggest six themes of a spiritual personality theory which leave the reader wanting more. Fortunately, these six themes are promised as the topic of a subsequent book.

The third main section of the book is comprised of six chapters related to the task of psychotherapy. Richards and Bergin first suggest a theistic, spiritual view of psychotherapy which requires the therapist to see spirituality as a vital part of a whole person. However, they also provide appropriate evidence that spiritual factors are only one part of the larger whole. They distinguish between an ecumenical posture, where the therapist's role is to understand religion and spirituality in the same way as we understand other multicultural variables, and a denominational posture, where religious beliefs may take a central role in the psychotherapeutic encounter. They go on to consider five ethical issues: dual relationships, displacing or usurping religious authority, imposing religious values, violating work setting boundaries, and practising outside one's boundaries of competence. For each of these ethical issues the authors provide a helpful summary checklist. Though generally an excellent discussion of ethics, they make a distinction between moral confrontation and condemning behaviour that borders

on untenable. Richards and Bergin suggest that psychotherapists should never condemn behaviour (though ecclesiastical leaders may sometimes find this necessary), but that moral confrontation is sometimes appropriate. Though a winsome distinction at first glance, the authors provide little to help a psychotherapist differentiate one from the other.

The next chapter pertains to religious and spiritual assessment—a chapter which is now required reading for doctoral students in my personality assessment course. The authors promote a multilevel–multisystemic approach to spiritual assessment, suggesting an ecumenical ‘level 1’ assessment is appropriate for all psychotherapy clients and an in-depth ‘level 2’ assessment is appropriate for a subset of clients. They provide helpful suggestions for interview questions and intake questionnaires along with recommendations for specific assessment devices (while acknowledging a relative dearth of useful standardised assessment tools).

Richards and Bergin also discuss religious and spiritual practices as therapeutic interventions. They consider activities such as prayer, contemplation, reading sacred writings, forgiveness, repentance, worship, fellowship, spiritual direction, and moral instruction. They carefully consider the scant literature on spiritual interventions, distinguish between religious and spiritual interventions, discuss in-session versus out-of-session interventions, and continue their helpful distinction between ecumenical and denominational strategies. They also consider the religiously informed treatment programmes developed by others and reported in the literature. Finally, the authors have solicited 8 case reports that illustrated the challenges and opportunities of religiously sensitive interventions. Each report is

written in the first person by the therapist. The cases are helpful to read, but would be even more helpful if the discussions were explicitly integrated with the spiritual strategies articulated throughout the book.

The final section of the book consists of two chapters pertaining to research and future directions. The first of these chapters is a primer on epistemology, calling the reader back to theistic realism and the worldview discussions found in the Foundations section. The authors clearly advocate a methodological pluralism that leaves room for multiple ways of knowing. The final chapter suggests directions for future research.

In conclusion, *A Spiritual Strategy* is timely, well-written, nicely organized, and filled with helpful tables and examples. As might be expected from scientist–practitioners of their stature, Richards and Bergin have combined scholarly thoroughness with applied practicality. Though others have covered the theoretical bases of religious interventions more completely (e.g. Shafranske, 1996), this volume is among the best available for those considering the clinical implications of religiously—sensitive interventions. It is not just a book for religious psychologists—all those providing clinical services and all psychologists-in-training should be aware of this resource.

#### REFERENCE

- SHAFRANSKE, E.P. (Ed.) (1996) *Religion and the Clinical Practice of Psychology*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
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