

Recognising Spiritual Needs in People Who Are Dying, Rachel Stanworth (OUP 2004), xvi + 255 pp, £24.95 pbk

This book emerges out of a piece of doctoral research conducted at St Christopher's Hospice, London. It explores the all-encompassing horizon that gives meaning to human life and its finitude. The researcher listened to the stories of 25 hospice patients and conduct a period of participant observation on one of the ward areas. From this data she attempts to construct a story of how human spirituality experiences death.

Spirituality is here defined as 'not necessarily anchored in religion and it is not shared in the sense of a lowest common denominator, but by analogies of experience across cultural or religion boundaries ... it refers to the interpretive story and ensuing values o an experience that is regarded as both human and ultimate' (p. 1).

Stanworth divides the book into four parts. Part One provides theoretical support for the spiritual interpretation of an individual' words and deeds. It argues that we live and die in story; metaphor and symbol are presented as the tools of story-making. They mediate our understanding of ourselves and of our place in the world. Psychology, spirituality and religion are all presented as stories with conflicting limits and it is their understanding of symbolic potency that determines where the limit is set. This part also describes how the many examples of patient narrative and behaviour were collected analysed and interpreted.

Part Two presents a non-religious language of spirit. It shows ho patients make spiritually significant statements, and argues that the are three major aspects to this language, none of which is a rigid category. She also shows how patients mobilize ritual and are affected by the deeper meaning and paradoxes of silence.

Patients' voices claim Part Three and Stanworth offers a model to explain and illuminate the data. Finally, Part Four offers practical advice, encouraging the reader into a deeper reflection. Spiritual care, Stanworth argues, like good story, demands a response and to this end she offers some modest suggestions for the creation of a free and friendly interpersonal space where carers can hopefully be the way that spiritual care is given without being in the way'.

This is, in every way, an excellent book and makes a significant contribution to the literature around palliative care. For those of us working in this area from a Christian perspective, most can be learned from Stanworth's profound and radical call for all care to engage in the deep paradoxes of silence in the nurturing of a compassionate and non judgemental listening. How different might our theologies be it this were our starting point, the crucible of wisdom? There is more clarity in this book than in most about the relationship between religion and spirituality. However, Stanworth is weaker in her discussion of the nature and function of religion. Pastoral and practical theology need to work more creatively in this area to show how theology can be a resource for our journey and our journey's end.

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