

Spirituality and the Practice of Health Care, Simon Robinson, Kevin Kendrick and Alan Brown (Palgrave Macmillan 2003), xv + 251 pp, £17.99 pbk

Everyone seems attracted to the concept of spirituality though continues to be notoriously difficult to define. This has not been helped by a recent shift in its use from a concern with prayer and the human relationship with God to a less formally religious sense articulating something beyond the material. In the context of the decline of religion and religious narratives, spirituality has become popular concern, relating to the non-material aspects of human life, and this book adds to the growing literature in the area. No doubt there is some attractiveness to the whole concept of 'religionless spirituality' but there are real conceptual and practical difficulties relating this unclear concept, 'the spiritual', to the actual practice health care.

These three Leeds writers set themselves an ambitious agenda and succeed, but only partially. The writing is uneven and there are some significant gaps in a wide-ranging but inconsistent research and bibliographical base. Too little of the discussion goes far enough in its exploration to be of much practical use to, for example, a nurse or chaplain. The writers work hard and creatively to provide insightful reflection on the nature of spirituality and its practical implications for care, but this reader is unsure about how far the text can take the practitioner. It might have been more helpful and fruitful for the writers to have declared their own spiritual traditions and have been more explicit about their own assumptions and prejudices. Further more the book is limited by the context of secondary care without any real acknowledgement of the revolution that has taken place in recent years in the organization and delivery of health especially in primary care.

The book is well organized and should be commended for the way it marshals material for the reader or student. Key elements of spirituality are considered in terms of conceptual, practical and organizational themes. Case studies play a central role in encouraging the reader to take a reflective stance and spirituality is discussed in several contexts including childbirth, childhood, ageing, death, mental health and learning disabilities. The questions for further thought at the end of each chapter are particularly helpful. The book deserves a wide readership and will certainly be helpful to students wanting a basic introduction to spirituality and health care. Further work remains to be done on whether theology and the religious tradition can enable us to embrace health and illness in their most fundamental dimensions.

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