

# Book Review

**Reviewed by Dr Martyn Baker, University of East London**

Shafranske, E.P. (Ed.) (1996). *Religion and the Clinical Practice of Psychology*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association. ISBN 1-55798-321-6

This is a book in three parts: Conceptual cultural and historical context; religion, mental health and clinical practice; Psychotherapy with religiously committed persons. As soon as I saw it, I was excited. It was indeed what I expected – a compendium of up-to-date literature at the interface of a particular version of psychology practised, and a particular version of religion. The psychology is almost without exception clinical, of the ‘face-to-face’ variety (‘counselling’ and ‘psychotherapy’ seem to be used interchangeably with ‘psychology’). The religion is Judeo-Christian, by and large. Consistent with these aspects, the book tends uncritically to equate personal autonomy and individualism with positive mental health, even though there are several places where this ‘western’ viewpoint is questioned.

So, what made it so very attractive to read? (i) It gave information not previously available to me that addressed issues knocking about in my mind. Two examples are: a suggested curriculum for training practitioner psychologists competently to work with issues of faith and belief, with clients; and, what is known about the religious attitudes and preferences of the psychologists themselves. (ii) It comprises a series of review articles, citing a large array of relevant references – it was like a volume of *Psychological Bulletin* in which every article engaged one’s personal interest; even the overwhelming sense of the too-much-ness of it all was not unpleasant. The end result was that I had that enjoyable albeit illusory sense that I had gotten a grasp of the field and that I wanted to find out more, follow up articles cited, allow ideas to germinate. (iii) The ideas put forward are informed by an impressive literature housed both in mainstream psychology journals – many prestigious – and also in psychology of religion journals, including some specific to Christianity; and in many recently published books. None of the references seemed ‘whacky’; rather, perusing them gave me renewed confidence to be a Christian psychologist! (I know, you’re probably thinking, “Hmm, what is he putting his trust in?”) (iv) The publication dates impressed on me the extended period of time over which psychologist in the USA have been and continue to give religion (i.e. Judeo-Christian religion) consideration, and the solid peer recognition this work is given – for instance, the APA have created a specialist Division, and included ‘religion’ in the list of client diversities and values demanded to be taken seriously into account in its ethical practice guidelines.

Why did I end up with misgivings? They seem less easy to express than the foregoing points. They do not concern the book, which is unremittingly excellent. But the book is about religion per se, and this is not what I think I want my primary focus to be. If I were to circumscribe my attention to what the book says about ‘the psychology of Christianity’, would that also miss the mark, for me? I remember when I first discovered NeCIP, that ‘Christian psychology’ was the goal I strongly had in mind. Admittedly, I currently feel more drawn towards something less ambitious – trying to ascertain any defining characteristics of the ways in which psychologists who are Christians practise their psychology (and similarly of the practice of Christians who are psychologists, of their Christianity). Even so, a little suspicion lingers – not at all of the book, but of the allure it had for me. I am not sure I can put it any more clearly. Have a read of it yourself, and see what you think!

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