

The Reviewer

Mateus Soares de Azevedo is the author of eight books and dozens of essays on the Perennial Philosophy and comparative mysticisms, several of them translated from Portuguese and published in English, French, and Spanish in North America and Europe. Among them, *Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy* (USA, 2005) and *Men of a Single Book* (USA, 2011), which received the award winner in the “USA Best Books of 2011.” He lives with his wife and children in the chaotic, but fascinating, city of São Paulo, Brazil.

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VIETEN, CASSANDRA & SCAMMELL, SHELLEY (2015). *Spiritual and Religious Competencies in Clinical Practice*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications. xvii + 229. ISBN: 978-62625-105-2. Softcover, \$49.95. *Reviewed by David Lukoff.*

This is not an objective review but an appreciative one, along with an historical review situating the publication of this book within transpersonal psychology. Although I am not an author of this book, together with the two authors, I am a co-author of the two published research studies that provide the empirical foundation for this book (Vieten et al., 2013; Vieten et al., in press). I have been a transpersonal psychologist for 40 years and the co-president of ATP, as well as being a researcher on spiritual issues in mental health. I see this book as one of the fruits of the spiritual emergency movement that evolved within transpersonal psychology (Grof & Grof, 1985) which was focused on the misdiagnosis and mistreatment of people in the midst of spiritual crises. This book is dedicated to Stanislav and Christina Grof who were the pioneers of the spiritual emergency movement.

Some of my work has also been in this area. In 1985, I proposed a new diagnostic category entitled Mystical Experience with Psychotic Features (MEPF) to identify intense spiritual experiences that present as psychotic-like episodes. In 1989, Francis Lu, a psychiatrist on the faculty at UC Davis, and I began collaborating on a proposal for a new diagnostic category for the then-in-development *DSM-IV*, which we saw as the most effective way to increase the sensitivity of mental health professionals to spiritual crises. The transpersonal movement supported this 4 year effort through publication of articles in JTP and presentations at ATP conferences to fine tune the proposal. Ultimately in 1994, the proposal for a new diagnostic category was accepted: Religious or Spiritual Problem. This is not listed as a mental disorder but a problem in living that requires some clinical attention.

Psychology and psychiatry have a long history of ignoring and pathologizing religion and spirituality. This DSM category has served as a foot the door which has opened the mental health field to a broader consideration of spirituality in mental

health. This shift to integrating spirituality has been influenced by multiple factors such as the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organization's requirement that every patient chart contain a spiritual assessment, increased multicultural sensitivity to the fact that most people in the USA view their religious/spiritual life as important to their wellbeing, supportive empirical research showing the health benefits of religion and spirituality, research on the efficacy of practices that originated within religions such as meditation, and the consumer movement's interest in including spirituality in recovery (Lukoff, Mahler, & Mancuso, 2009). Today, within mainstream psychological theory and research, we are seeing the continued exploration of transpersonal issues in the attention to "religious coping" and "spiritual struggles." Transpersonal psychology, starting with its founder Abraham Maslow's focus on self-actualization and optimal functioning, has been the tip of the spear in this change. The early transpersonal work on distinguishing a spiritual emergency from a psychotic disorder which led to a diagnostic category for spiritual problems has laid the groundwork for this new work on spiritual competencies which recognizes spirituality as a resource for wellness and recovery and the value of spiritually oriented interventions such as mindfulness practices. (Disclosure: As a co-president of ATP, no claim for the objectivity of these claims is asserted.)

The authors provide this definition of the scope of their topic:

Spiritual Competencies are a set of attitudes, knowledge and skills that we propose every psychologist should have to competently practice psychology, regardless of whether or not they conduct spiritually-oriented psychotherapy or consider themselves spiritual or religious. (p. 16)

The set of 16 competencies have been validated by multiple surveys and expert input, in line with how multicultural and other competencies have been developed in the mental health field. They are oriented at the baseline level of competency rather than at proficiency. This is what every mental health professional SHOULD know. The authors state, "The premise of this book is that clinical acumen, common sense, and general cultural competence are insufficient for adequately attending to the religious and spiritual domains of our clients' lives...specific training in religious and spiritual competencies is essential to becoming an adept therapist in today's world" (p. 2).

I have been using this book in a graduate course at the PsyD program of Sofia University. We have had the luxury of devoting most of the course to developing these attitudes, skills, and knowledge. Activities have included writing a spiritual autobiography, conducting a spiritual assessment with someone outside the class, keeping a gratitude journal for a week, and other exercises from the book. I have also been showing some of the YouTube videos from the resources section which lists audiovisual materials, organizations, books, web sites, and other resources for each competency. Even though actively involved in this area, I still found many new resources, perspectives, and recent research I had not run across. Case vignettes illustrate many of the challenges and strategies for developing these competencies. I found myself actively involved while reading this book—underlining sections, copying down points for Powerpoint slides in my courses

and workshops, and writing down references to retrieve. It is a tour de force of contemporary scholarship which is not uncritical. It includes examination of the dysfunctional and negative effects of some religious and spiritual beliefs, practices, and groups. The authors also highlight sensitivity toward nonbelievers who are unaffiliated with any religion and/or uninvolved with any spiritual practices or groups, but who still struggle to find a sense of meaning and purpose in life. They point out how with some rephrasing most of these competencies still apply.

As documented in surveys, current training in religious and spiritual competencies provided to mental health professionals is infrequent, informal, and unsystematic. While this book does not come with any predesigned quizzes or PowerPoint slides as with many textbooks, it functions quite well as a textbook to provide structured in depth interactive and even transformational learning. A course environment provides more time to practice being mindful of religious and spiritual issues in a clinical setting, conduct a spiritual assessment, identify religious and spiritual struggles, examine biases and assumptions, and become more aware of and sensitive to ethical and diversity issues pertaining to religion and spirituality, but the exercises and materials can be adapted for a workshop setting.

Based on personal teaching experience, I also concur with Larry Dossey's assessment (appearing in the front matter with other endorsements) that this book "is a doorway toward a more empathic, compassionate, and effective form of healing." As my students have reflected on their own biases as well as spiritual strengths, beliefs and attitudes, and as they have learned skills like how to conduct a spiritual assessment, they have consistently reported finding a more compassionate place within themselves to provide spiritually-sensitive care. In sum, this is a profound personal and pedagogical resource for anyone in the field of mental health.

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The Author

Shelley Scammell, PsyD, is a licensed clinical psychologist with a twenty-year practice in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is an adjunct professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, and has taught psychology at Sonoma State University,

as well as at the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Formerly, she was an associate professor of English at New York University, and taught at Baruch College and Mount Holyoke. As co-president of the Institute for Spirituality and Psychology, she was fundamental in developing the sixteen competencies. She has published articles on the competencies in APA journals as well as presented them at several APA national conventions. Her extensive background in Western and Eastern spiritual practices and studies has informed her diagnosis and treatment of clients in spiritual struggles. Her clinical experience has fostered a desire to share this expertise with fellow clinicians.

Cassandra Vieten, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist, Executive Director of Research at the Institute of Noetic Sciences (www.noetic.org), and Scientist at the Mind Body Medicine Research Group at California Pacific Medical Center Research Institute in San Francisco, CA. Her research on mindfulness-based approaches to dealing with addictions, mood disorders, and for stress reduction during pregnancy and early motherhood has been funded by the National Institutes of Health, the State of California, and several private foundations. She is author of *Mindful Motherhood: Practical Tools for Staying Sane During Pregnancy and Your Child's First Year*. Her research has also focused on spiritual practices and health, and how people make significant changes in their lives toward more meaning, health, and well-being. In addition to *Mindful Motherhood*, she is coauthor, along with Marilyn Schlitz and Tina Amorok, of *Living Deeply: The Art and Science of Transformation in Everyday Life*.

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David Lukoff, Ph.D., is a Professor of Psychology at Sofia University and a licensed psychologist in California. He is the author of 80 articles and chapters on spiritual issues and mental health and co-author of the *DSM-IV* category Religious or Spiritual Problems.