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Fontana, D. (2003). *Psychology, religion, and spirituality*. Oxford, U.K.: BPS Blackwell. ix + 260 pp. ISBN: 1-40510-806-1, paper, \$27.95 US, *Reviewed by William Braud*

There was a time when treatments of philosophy, psychology, and spirituality were well-integrated, not yet separated into distinct disciplines. There were times when psychology itself, even as a distinct discipline, addressed issues of great importance to our lived experience—topics that philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich (1963) would call matters of *ultimate concern*, of ultimate, unconditional seriousness. Because religion and spirituality involve issues of great meaning and import to many of us, it is unfortunate that contemporary psychology pays so little attention to these topics. There are, however, increasing signs that psychology gradually is reopening its doors to important topics that it previously ostracized. Mainstream psychology is experiencing a slow but ever-increasing influx of interest in topics that had been relegated to the less conventional areas of existential, humanistic, and transpersonal thought, and to what Jacob Needleman and David Appelbaum (1990) have called *real philosophy*.

David Fontana's *Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality* represents a milestone in this trend of psychology's gradual opening to greater possibilities and approaches. One indication of the book's importance is that it bears the imprint of the British Psychological Society (the equivalent of the American Psychological Association [APA]) and of a prestigious British publisher, Blackwell.

What is most appealing about this book is the author's inquiring attitude, scholarship, sensitivity, and respect for his topic; the book's extensive, inclusive, and nuanced coverage; and the book's remarkable balance of historical and present concerns, theory and research, inner and outer treatments of its topics, Eastern and Western traditions, transcendent and immanent perspectives, and strengths and limitations of the presented findings and theories.

In the book's 14 chapters (including an Introduction and Conclusion), Fontana addresses a wide range of important psychological and spiritual issues in three major religions that emanated from the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and three systems that originated from the Indian subcontinent (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism)—with most attention being paid to Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, because these have been treated most fully by Western theologians, philosophers, and psychologists.

Chapter 1 (Why the Psychology of Religion?) describes both the positive and negative influences of religious traditions and presents four reasons for psychology's current neglect of religion and spirituality: (a) religion and spirituality appear to be contrary to the dominant scientific and materialist-reductionist Modern Western Mindset (to use a term favored by Huston Smith [1992]); (b) it has at times opposed the progress of scientific thinking; (c) the proper study of religion and spirituality require extensive knowledge—not only of the history, philosophy, theology, creative arts, and cultural

contexts in which these are embedded, but also of their inner and esoteric aspects as well as their more familiar outer and exoteric facets; and (d) the inner, subjective experiences on which they are based present major methodological challenges.

Chapter 2 (Definitions and Meanings) provides rich and thoughtful treatments and definitions of religion, spirituality, materialism, God, belief, knowing, and faith, drawing on both Eastern and Western traditions

Chapter 3 (Introspection and Inner Experience) presents an historical account of psychology's methods and challenges in studying inner experiences, including a rich section on how humanistic and transpersonal psychologies have addressed such experiences.

In Chapter 4 (Approaches to the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality), Fontana describes one of the major features of this book—its both/and treatment of the outer/social/behavioral/it-and-they/exoteric approach as well as the inner/introspective/experiential/esoteric approach to the study of religion and spirituality. Additionally, the chapter briefly treats religious symbolism and the female and male principles of the Divine.

Chapter 5 (Religious Beliefs and Practices) features beliefs in rewards and punishments, the nature of a future (after death) life, a brief treatment of near-death experiences, and the different behavior codes of different traditions.

Chapter 6 (Approaches to Spiritual Development) provides concise yet effective treatments of the hatha, karma, bhakti, jnana, and raja yoga approaches, with indications of their parallels in the Western traditions. The raja yoga section includes a clear summary of the *Patanjali Yoga Sutra* steps and their expected concomitants.

In a brief Chapter 7 (Spirituality and the Brain), Fontana describes recent work on brain structures and functions (the “God Spot” and “God Module” research findings) that appear to be related to spiritual experiences, and he does this without succumbing to a facile reductionism. He also summarizes Zohar and Marshall's (2000) writings on “spiritual intelligence” as a complement of cognitive and emotional “intelligences.”

In Chapter 8 (The Origins of Religious Belief), Fontana presents and critiques McDougal's, psychodynamic, object-relations, and Jungian attempts to interpret and explain various religious beliefs.

A brief Chapter 9 (Religious Expression in Myth and the Creative Arts) addresses the roles of creative imagination, poetry, music, and story-making in religion. In a section on “Revelation and Fantasy,” Fontana makes telling observations of the profound *consequences* of the revelations that informed the Vedas, the Bible, and the Qu'ran:

No works of known fantasy have had anything approaching this effect [on morality, ethics, education, life meaning, afterlife beliefs, and even the making of war and peace]. The psychologist is bound to seek the reasons

for this. Why should texts written centuries ago . . . have had, and continue to have, such a hold over the human mind? (p 107)

The next three chapters are sections that will be of greatest interest to readers of this Journal, in that they address at length and with incisiveness four topics of great relevance to transpersonal psychology: the varieties of religious and spiritual (especially mystical) experiences, consciousness, the self, and the positive and negative contributions of religion and spirituality to physical and psychological health and well-being.

Chapter 10 (Varieties of Religious and Spiritual Experience) is a lengthy and richly rewarding chapter that treats religious experience, immanent and transcendent mystical experience, the stages of mystical experience (informed by Evelyn Underhill's [1911] model [accidentally mis-cited as Underwood]), the relationship of mysticism to psychosis, the features of mystical experience, triggers and motivations of mysticism, mystical experience and sport, religious conversion, personality factors and religiosity, the relevance of a variety of dreams (including dream yoga, dream guidance, and a favorable treatment of dream telepathy research), and the relationship of creativity and drugs to mystical experience. A compelling section presents various suggested explanations for mystical experiences (focusing on psychodynamic and naturalistic explanations). What is noteworthy about this and other sections is that Fontana's treatments of explanations always are well balanced and thorough: Not only does he present alternative explanatory attempts, but he critiques these well, indicates their strengths and weaknesses, critiques the critiques, then goes the additional step of suggesting new research projects that might test the alternative explanations. He concludes the chapter with a novel four-fold classification of religious belief, based on two orthogonal dimensions of transcendence/immanence and tender (tolerant toward other faiths)/tough ("extreme insistence upon nonviolence toward any living creature, rather than tough in any confrontational sense" p. 157) features.

Chapter 11 (Concepts of Self, Soul, and Brain) also is rich in transpersonal content. Here, Fontana treats the nature of the self, the role of "thinking" in understanding the self, the Higher Self as an organizing principle (focusing on the thoughts of Assagioli, Maslow, and Jung), stilling the small self, freedom of the will, the problem of evil (including Jung's *shadow* notions), the study of consciousness, models of consciousness (focusing on the Advaita Vedanta developmental model and Wilber's most recent model), the mind-brain relationship, near-death experiences, prayer and distant healing research, and the relevance of evidence from parapsychological research to the mind/soul/spirit concept.

In Chapter 12 (Religion, Health, and Well-being), Fontana reviews evidence for relationships between religion/spirituality/mysticism and physical and psychological health and well-being, including influences on wars and violence and on attitudes toward the natural environment. Here, again, he presents a balanced view—describing both positive and negative influences and, as he does throughout the book, presenting both strengths and weaknesses of alternative explanations and suggesting empirical tests of conflicting views. Near the chapter's end, one finds the intriguing suggestion that the

original Hebrew terms *kivshuah* and *redu* (in Genesis 1:26) might more accurately be translated in terms of *cultivation*, *engagement*, and *responsibility* rather than the usual “*domination*” [of nature] (p. 226).

Throughout this book, I was impressed by the author’s inquiring attitude; his open, honest, and humble approach to his topics; his provision of additional resources for interested readers; and the care and caution he displays in wording his conclusions. Readers of this journal will especially appreciate the emphases on inner experience, transpersonal aspects, the value of qualitative and small-n research approaches, myths as genuine insights, the importance of mysticism in spiritual and religious studies, and a greater than usual recognition of correspondences across religious, spiritual, and wisdom traditions. Two small criticisms of the book are that closer editing could have eliminated a not insignificant number of minor errors throughout the text, and that the addition of more “poetry” could have been included to complement the book’s dominant academic tone.

This book should be required reading for anyone interested in psychology, religion, spirituality, or transpersonal studies.

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Reviewer

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