



A Theistic Spiritual Strategy: What Good Is It?

A Review of

A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy (2nd ed.)

by P. Scott Richards and Allen E. Bergin

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Reviewed by

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This is a grand book in every sense of the word, and a grand book with a specific point of view. The authors explore the practicalities and possibilities for integrating and using religious and spiritual strategies and interventions in the mainstream of mental health work. The focus is on what the authors call a *theistic spiritual strategy*. The book is both scholarly—integrating and updating research in each chapter area covered—and practice oriented, with practical guidelines and case examples for practitioners. It is an outstanding example, at a highly articulated level, of the integration of research and practice, with a convincing case for the importance of a theistic spiritual strategy.

The scope of the book is broad, yet it keeps the reader focused. After an introduction on the need for a theistic spiritual strategy, which clearly lays out Richards' and Bergin's focus and assumptions, the reader moves on to chapters on historical perspectives, then on to additional chapters on theological, philosophical, and theoretical perspectives. The heart of this book is the series of chapters on Theistic Psychotherapy: Process and Methods. A concluding section discusses research and future directions.

The reader may ask, "How does this book compare with similar books in the area, such as *Integrating Spirituality Into Treatment: Resources for Practitioners* (Miller, 2000) or *Spiritually Oriented Psychotherapy* (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005)?" *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy* is not an edited book. It provides the reader with a well-written, well-organized, integrated work of scholarship and practical guidelines. The discussion of ethics is more comprehensive and the discussion of spiritual assessment more elaborate than one will find in other places. The reader may not find some of the far-ranging topics found elsewhere, such as special chapters on meditation, forgiveness, or interpersonal psychotherapy from a spiritual perspective; however, most of these topics are integrated into the text material of *A Spiritual Strategy*. The reader will find a well-organized, well-written, well-researched, and well-presented view of a theistic strategy. Miller (2000) and Sperry and Shafranske (2005) are more ecumenical in their approach to integrating spirituality. The theistic strategy presented by Richards and Bergin may rankle some readers, yet there is much to gain from this wonderful presentation of theistic strategies for integration into mainstream psychotherapy. There is food for thought and discussion, as well as a groundwork of ideas for researchers.

What Is a Theistic Spiritual Strategy?

What exactly is a theistic spiritual strategy? Richards and Bergin have attempted to provide a theistic strategy

for mainstream psychotherapy that can provide a culturally sensitive framework for clients who may be devout or who can benefit from using spiritual resources or interventions. The authors indicate that in the Western hemisphere and in Europe, more than 80 percent of the population professes adherence to a major theistic world religion (Judaism, Christianity, or Islam). The authors believe that the efficacy of psychological treatment can be enhanced by accessing the spiritual resources found in the theistic religions.

What are the assumptions of theistic spiritual strategy? Richards and Bergin are very clear about their position and its assumptions. A theistic spiritual strategy assumes that God exists and that people are the creations of God; that there are unseen spiritual processes that link God and humanity; and that people who draw on spiritual resources in treatment will have more strength to cope and to heal.

This theistic spiritual perspective proposed by Richards and Bergin is based in a theistic conceptual framework, includes a body of religious and spiritual interventions, and provides guidelines for implementing theistic interventions and perspectives. The theistic framework and perspective are clearly articulated, and the strategy is integrative—the interventions discussed are to be integrated into mainstream secular perspectives.

As theistic strategy assumes the belief in God or a Supreme Being who guides and influences human beings, some readers may not agree or may even find the proposals objectionable. Richards and Bergin are well aware of this, and they address this concern at various points in the book. The authors also believe, and propose, that both therapists and clients can seek and receive guidance and inspiration from a divine source. Some readers may find this to be an extreme position in the use of spiritual resources in mental health treatment. Other readers may disagree with the various interventions proposed by the authors, which include praying with clients, using imagery with spiritual content, and encouraging clients to seek blessings and spiritual guidance from their religious leaders. Again, Richards and Bergin are aware of this, address all of these possible objections, and recognize that they have taken a strong position in many ways. Not everything proposed by the authors is empirically grounded or treated, but they are well aware of this. There is much of value in this book even for those readers who may object to certain positions or assumptions of the authors. The good thing is that the authors are so clear about their assumptions that they make them explicit and allow for productive disagreement and discussion by the reader.

What About Ethics, Assessment, and Intervention?

One of the strengths of this book is the discussion of ethical issues in the use of spiritual strategies by the mental health professional. The ethical codes of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, the American Counseling Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the National Association of Social Workers are addressed, in addition to that of the American Psychological Association. Few books in this area have such a comprehensive discussion of ethics, a needed and important topic. Other books do provide a discussion of values (Miller, 2000). The chapter on ethics includes the topics of engaging in dual relationships; displacing or usurping religious authority; imposing religious values; violating church–state boundaries; and practicing outside the boundaries of competence. Other concerns are also discussed, such as indications and contraindications for spiritual interventions. Each of these topic subheadings includes a discussion with empirical research where available, ethical dilemmas and case vignettes illustrating the topic, and a checklist of guidelines and recommendations geared to each topic.

Another excellent chapter is that on religious and spiritual assessment. Richards and Bergin advocate for all psychotherapists to assess clients' religious and spiritual backgrounds, along with all other aspects of their lives. In tune with the authors' practical, step-by-step approach, yet grounded in empirical research, the chapter begins with an extensive discussion of reasons for conducting a religious–spiritual assessment. For example, psychotherapists can better understand their clients' worldview. They can determine if the clients' spiritual orientation is healthy (or not) and its impact on the presenting problems. They can determine if the

clients' spiritual beliefs can be used as a resource in the therapy. They can decide which spiritual interventions might be useful. They can determine whether clients have unresolved spiritual doubts or concerns that should be addressed in therapy.

In the assessment chapter, Richards and Bergin go on to discuss in detail the process of making a religious–spiritual assessment, and they identify various approaches for doing so. Several scales and assessment interview outlines are presented here, and empirical research, where available, is presented. There is also a discussion of assessing the outcomes in psychotherapy by including the spiritual outcomes and how this might be accomplished.

The heart of this book for practitioners will be the chapters on spiritual interventions. A great variety of interventions are discussed in detail, along with existing empirical literature related to each intervention. For example, there is a discussion of prayer as a psychotherapy intervention. Research is reported on how spiritually oriented psychotherapists are currently using prayer (i.e., praying with clients or encouraging clients to use prayer). Richards and Bergin provide a thoughtful discussion about why they have serious reservations about therapists praying with clients in a session. This has to do with possible role boundary conflicts that may occur for the therapist, as well as unhealthy transference issues that may arise for the client. Some readers may object to the notion of prayer as a spiritual intervention in mainstream psychotherapy. One of the good things about this book is its thoughtful, elaborate, and, when possible, empirically supported discussion of the pros and cons of various interventions. There is a page of major conclusions summarizing reviews of the research on religion and psychotherapeutic processes.

There is but one paragraph on the applications of spiritual interventions to multicultural and special populations. This is one area where I yearned for more information, case studies, empirical reviews, and guidelines, such as are presented throughout the rest of the book. When the third edition of this book comes out, I hope this topic will be greatly expanded. This is the one important area that I found to be lacking in this otherwise excellent book.

Another excellent and useful section is that on research and future research directions. The book is full of research ideas and provides direction on areas that need further empirical grounding and areas where controversy still exists. Although excellent, the section on future research is one that may overlap with other books in this area.

The main drawback of this book for some readers will most likely be the strong positions and overtly religious—theistic—nature of the material. But the authors are clear and focused and spell out their assumptions and their point of view. They welcome discussion and debate.

A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy is an exciting book, one that will promote discussion and thought, even if the reader does not fully agree with all points made by the authors. It is a grand book with a grand vision (assumptions carefully laid out), and it is in the process of evolving. This is the second edition of the book, and it includes additional theoretical grounding for the theistic spiritual strategy, as well as an update to the growing body of empirical literature related to spiritual interventions and other aspects of spirituality and religion in mental health. This book is synergistic with other books in the area, and it balances and complements other works while adding a unique, important, and powerful perspective.

References

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