

Review

Steve Nolan and Margaret Holloway, *A-Z of Spirituality*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 238 pp. (Pbk). ISBN 978-1-137-30092-8, £14.99.

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Spirituality has grown in significance in the healthcare profession, especially with the alleged growth of patients who identify as “spiritual, but not religious” and the demand for chaplaincy to acknowledge beliefs that are not religious (such as humanism). The *A-Z of Spirituality* is intended to be a resource for healthcare practitioners who may be unfamiliar with, or wish to know more about, ideas and concepts relating to spirituality in order to inform their everyday practice. Nolan writes as a chaplaincy practitioner in palliative care, a specialism where spirituality is increasingly valued in the NHS. Holloway comes from a research background, focusing on spirituality and end of life. Consequently, it can be expected that a high level of expertise regarding spirituality informed this book, from both practitioner and academic perspectives. While the authors both specialize in palliative care, due attention has been given to applying the terms defined in this book to a variety of healthcare specialisms including mental and acute health more generally. This level of generality is helpful for healthcare practitioners who are involved in varying specialisms within healthcare.

The book is designed as a reference guide for specific terms relating to spirituality that may arise in everyday spiritual care practice. Selected terms relating to spirituality and spiritual care are dealt with alphabetically, enabling readers to easily locate terms that are immediately useful to them. The authors helpfully suggest other terms that relate to the entry below each heading, in which the reader can make associations between terms. Thus, entries are not necessarily taken in isolation, but fall within a web of meanings and concepts, offering some contextualization of these terms. Each entry is interwoven with a succinct account of historical context and varying conceptualizations of terms, as well as engagement with contemporary

scholarship. The reader is directed to recommended sources for further information, as a clear point of access into the vast literature surrounding spirituality.

This book provides a helpful introduction to basic terms relating to spirituality that healthcare practitioners may come across in their everyday work with patients. Some of these are increasingly popular in healthcare practice beyond chaplaincy, such as mindfulness and resilience. The vast scope of spirituality has been sufficiently captured, demonstrated by a wide variety of concepts, from “God” to “person-centred therapy” to “Zen”. The ground covered is enormous and the entries provide comprehensive explanations and histories of the core terms. When it is not obvious how a term may relate to healthcare practice, the authors draw on helpful illustrations for clarification. For example, their entry on “myth” relates healthcare to the ritual practice surrounding the mythology of the Greek god Asklepios, which acknowledged the psychological and spiritual dimensions of healthcare (p. 105).

The A-Z of Spirituality provides an invaluable summary of terms relating to spirituality for healthcare practitioners, yet it is not wholly transparent how the terms that are used in the book were selected. The authors note that they discussed which terms “absolutely must be included” (p. ix), yet the criteria for selection were not elucidated. For example, it is not apparent why “karma” is given an entry, while “sin” is not. Alternatively larger categories incorporate complex entities under one entry and may not provide the appropriate detail for the concepts and ideas encompassed. In particular, the entry regarding “the World Religions” impressively covers Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam over three pages, while Sikhism and Christianity have been excluded (pp. 182–84).

Nolan and Holloway rightly discuss challenges to spirituality, both in terms of its perceived lack of content and the danger of “cultural imperialism” and “intellectual piracy” (p. 60) when concepts from a particular cultural background are appropriated by Western ideas of spirituality. However, these tend to be acknowledged as throwaway references repeated across several entries, rather than being presented as part of a sustained argument. This is an unfortunate omission because these challenges have an impact on how spirituality as a whole is conceived. Thus, a critical chapter addressing these contentions might have helped strengthen the underlying premise of the book, i.e. that spirituality is an essential aspect of human existence that should also be accounted for in healthcare provision. Additionally, religious and spiritual beliefs are often presented as facilitating better health, while the book rarely acknowledges possible harm that may be caused by spiritual or religious beliefs, particularly in the case of mental health. This betrays an

assumption on the part of the authors that spirituality is self-evidently relevant and liberating, and that, by extension, all healthcare professionals buy into spirituality and spiritual care. Nolan and Holloway's implicit assumptions about the relevance of spirituality may have been more convincing if the statistics used to support the claim that people are "spiritual but not religious" were about Britons and not Americans (p. 161).

Overall, *The A-Z of Spirituality* provides a comprehensive overview of a broad vocabulary relating to spirituality in an engaging and accessible manner, drawing on generic terms that may be useful to healthcare professionals, but also some religious terms specific to particular traditions. These terms may be oversimplified but the authors situate them within a broader web of meaning by connecting them to other concepts. Nolan and Holloway helpfully pinpoint important critiques of spirituality, although such critiques are not addressed with depth, which may be unsatisfactory for those who are new to or uncertain about spirituality. *The A-Z of Spirituality* provides a springboard for further reflection on spirituality, while refraining from claiming to be a substitute to encounters with patients from a variety of traditions and worldviews as a resource for learning more about spirituality.