

## Review

Heinz Streib and Ralph W. Hood Jr (eds), *Semantics and Psychology of Spirituality: A Cross Cultural Analysis*. Switzerland: Springer International, 2016 xv + 694 pp. (hbk). ISBN: 978-3-31921-244-9. £196.00.

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This book is a weighty tome in both size and content weighing in at 1.8 kg. It would be a challenge to read it from cover to cover. The book is the product of the second of three related research studies. The first study looked at deconversion in Germany and the US (Streib *et al.* 2009), the third will investigate spiritual and religious developments across life span and this second study is a cross cultural study on “spirituality”. The study examines a key question: What do people mean when say they are spiritual. The book consists of 27 chapters split into seven parts with two appendices which alone run to 200 pages. The first appendix gives the data from the study and the second a selection of the interview transcripts in both English and German. There are lots of tables and graphs dispersed throughout the book not all of which are easy to understand.

The book is a report on The Bielefeld based cross-cultural study of “Spirituality” which aimed to get an in-depth understanding of what people mean by the term “spirituality” using an extensive multi-method design. The sample consisted of 1113 participants in America and 773 in Germany who all completed an on-line questionnaire. From this sample participants were selected for focus groups based around self-descriptions of the participants themselves using the terms: “spiritual”, “religious”, “atheist/non-theist”. Participants (54 in America and 48 in Germany) from these focus groups were then selected to undertake a semi-structured Faith Development Interview and participate in an experiment, the Implicit Association Test. Each chapter is essentially a research paper in itself examining different aspects of the study so the book does not have a sense of flow, however

this could be an advantage as it enables the reader to focus on areas of particular interest to them.

Part one of the book (Chapters 1–5) begins by laying out the authors' understanding of spirituality and argues for conceptualizing it within religion but focusing on an individual religiosity and highlighted transcendence and ultimate concern as key characteristics. The authors conclude that “spirituality” in itself is not a usable scientific construct. The authors describe the emergence of an experience based individual religiosity which is not embedded in religious organizations and does not need or even accept any institutional mediation which in an earlier paper Strieb and Hood (2011) describe as “privatised, experience-oriented religion”. There is then a synopsis of the previous deconversion study followed by details of all the methodologies used and a description of the sample. The final chapter is particularly interesting as it explores in depth the question: “Who is spiritual?” with reference to all the data collected. There are a number of outcomes and it is hard to summarize, but one difference noted was that in Germany most “more spirituals” report “no religion” whereas in the USA most “more spirituals” belong to a religious organization.

Part two (Chapters 6–10) deals with the semantics of “spirituality” and uses the various data sets to compare and contrast “spirituality” and “religion” and to see if people see these as separate concepts or related so addressing their original question of what do people mean when they say they are spiritual. The authors conclude the evidence supports their claim that “spirituality” is not a fuzzy concept but a multi-dimensional one “that cannot be studied in isolation from religion” (p. 153).

Part three (Chapters 11–14) examines the effects of being spiritual and concludes by arguing that “spirituality” is essentially a form of mysticism. This is based on the researchers using a scale developed by one of them called Hood's Mysticism Scale (M-Scale). They argue the M-Scale has content validity and recommend its use for those wanting to measure spirituality. This is an interesting concept and well worth looking into.

Parts four and five (Chapters 15–23) concentrate on the faith development interviews and here they draw extensively on Fowler's theory and research (indeed the book is dedicated to James W. Fowler) on faith development and the way to conduct the Faith Development interviews. Part five presents a set of faith biographies based on the interviews and other data collected. They aim to give a variety of different experiences and understandings of spirituality, religion and non-belief and to combine both qualitative and quantitative data. This narrative style data will resonate with those who, like me, struggle with statistics and charts – though there are plenty of those too.

Part six (Chapters 24–26) is entitled “Consequences of Being Spiritual” and seeks to explore what the relationship is between the self-attribution of the term spiritual and faith development. Chapter 25 is of particular note as it examines the association between “spirituality” and indicators of positive adult development. The authors note the problem of describing spirituality in terms of well-being which leads to an overlapping of concepts and spirituality not being a distinct entity. Here again they draw on the evidence of the M-Scale and suggest it has the ability to identify the unique contribution of spirituality to well-being. The evidence for the M-Scale is supported by a comprehensive critique of other spirituality assessment scales.

This is a comprehensive and detailed report of an extensive research study using multiple methodologies employing both qualitative and quantitative methods and achieving triangulation. However, this results in the reader being presented with an overwhelming amount of data and discussion. This study has a great deal to offer to a number of areas of study particularly the semantics of everyday religious language and to the cross-cultural study of religions. Many of the conclusions reached are perhaps what might be expected but the value of the study is the empirical data that evidences that experience. There are some really interesting topics here for hospital chaplains. The most important I think is that this study contributes some empirical evidence for the on-going quest for the meaning of, and research into, the slippery concept of spirituality.

## References

- Streib, H., and R. W. Hood (2011) “‘Spirituality’ as Privatized Experience-Oriented Religion: Empirical and Conceptual Perspectives”. *Implicit Religion* 14(4): 433–53. <https://doi.org/10.1558/imre.v14i4.433>
- Streib, H., et al. (2009) *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.