

*Spirituality and Social Work: Selected Canadian Readings* by John Coates, John R. Graham, Barbara Swartzentruber and Brian Ouelette. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2007. 356pp., Pb. CAN\$39.95/US\$39.95, ISBN-13: 9781551303291.

This long awaited publication achieves two important objectives. First, it demonstrates the breadth and depth of Canadian scholarship in this important field of spirituality and social work; and secondly it makes a significant contribution to the international debate on this theme. Overall there are 23 contributors, with most of the chapters being based on presentations made at recent annual conferences of the Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work

The book is divided into four sections, each of which is prefaced by a brief introduction by one of the co-authors. One good way of getting an early “feel” for the book as a whole is to read these four introductions first. Section One (5 chapters) gives an historical overview to the ways in which “spirituality has become a guiding construct in the development of Canadian social work.” It tells the story, which is familiar elsewhere in the world, of how spirituality has re-emerged within this professional discipline, a story which is both “self-locating” for Canadians and hugely instructive for others who may not appreciate just how significant this strand of scholarship has become.

Section 2 (7 chapters) explores spirituality and social work practice, including chapters on exploring the spiritual dimension of social work, where emphasis is laid upon recognizing barriers and obstacles as well as upon the importance of research.

Section 3 (3 chapters) looks at emerging areas of practice, including ecology and social justice; the importance of “location,” and the issue of stress.

The final Section (4 chapters and conclusion) explores Diversity and Faith traditions, with two examples from the Mennonite tradition and Black Churches in Canada, concluding with reflections on Islamic theology and prayer.

One of this book's strengths is its broad approach and the wide range of issues covered, although this will inevitably mean that any reader will immediately warm to some chapters and perhaps ignore others. It is something of a “mixed bag” therefore, but no worse for that, even though some chapters are surprisingly brief (chapter 3 lasts for only three pages, for example), and chapter 4's catena of excerpts from a 1948 publication has thought-provoking material but keeps the sexist language of the original and does not attempt to contextualize this discussion for unfamiliar read-

ers. Section 4 contains some valuable material, especially the chapter on Islam, which provides a working text for reflective practice, as social workers seek to explore the “inter-faith interface” of their professional practice. There is clearly scope, however, for more issues to be explored under this general multi-faith theme.

For this reviewer, however, the real gems are in Section 3, for which alone this book is worth buying. This is because the authors are making a contribution at the controversial cutting edge of the international debate to what is being referred to as the “greening of spirituality” (208). Both Coates and Zapf make profound contributions as they articulate the challenge of taking the environment seriously as a dimension of social work practice. Zapf in particular explores what it means to “live well in this place (ie our environment) and concludes by suggesting that an even deeper understanding of spirituality would take us to the question of “what does it mean to live well *as* this place?, thereby rejecting the fundamental distinction between person and place in favour of a unifying spiritual connection” (238).

When many social workers and academics are still struggling to see the relevance of spirituality to their social work practice, and to what it means to be human, this Section pushes the boundaries to the utmost and challenges us to have a profoundly holistic understanding that includes the deepest respect for, and partnership with our planet.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Brian Ouellette, who was one of the co-founders of the Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work. Brian died suddenly and unexpectedly in December 2005. His contribution to this volume is available for us all to read and to benefit from, but his wider and deeper contribution to the real heart of social work has left many people in his debt. He would have been proud to see this volume in print, but so many colleagues are proud to have known him, and will want to buy this book as a token of their affection for him and their own commitment to the cause he so powerfully championed.

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