

# European Network of Research on Religion, Spirituality and Health

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## Editorial

### Dear colleagues, dear friends

The past few months at RISH have been characterized by staff transitions, hosting a research meeting in Langenthal and a first meeting of the working group Spiritual Care Switzerland. We are encouraged to witness the growing interest from health professionals, counselors, psychologists, therapists, theologians and academics in the area of spiritual care.

At our recent meeting of the working group, we tried to map the various programs, groups and researchers in the field of Spiritual Care in Switzerland and came to the conclusion that it is indeed a colorful landscape, but that greater coordination and networking would be helpful.

The feature article of this newsletter summarizes Prof. Michael Utsch's presentation at the research meeting in Langenthal on *Controversies on Spiritual Interventions in Psychotherapy*.

Please also note that the upcoming conferences: Zurich 2017 and ECSRH 2018 in the announcement section.

*René Hefti*  
*Thomas Wartenweiler*

## Feature Article

### Controversies on Spiritual Approaches in Psychotherapy

#### The Shift from the Psychological Critique of Religion to Spiritual Therapies

*Michael Utsch*

Psychotherapists tend to be suspicious of religious beliefs because power is given to a "higher reality" instead of to self control. Yet, the radical critique of religion of early psychoanalysis which tried to eliminate such 'childish' beliefs has changed into psychotherapies integrating the spiritual dimension. Moreover, in transpersonal psychotherapies, healing effects of altered states of consciousness are propagated.

Many patients are seeking purpose, wholeness, and meaning in life by consulting a psychotherapist, some are even looking for a guru (Caplan 2011). Confronted with life-threatening illness, traumatic experiences or feelings of deep depression and meaninglessness, they raise existential questions. However, dealing with questions such as justice, suffering, truth, death, destiny or meaning in life, the therapist needs specific competencies to handle these questions professionally. Vieten et al. (2013) have described several spiritual competencies dealing with the spiritual dimension. First of all they point to appreciating religious and spiritual diversity and being aware of one's own beliefs. This open attitude is necessary to explore diverse beliefs and practices.



Nevertheless a psychotherapist who methodically focuses on the clients' point of view cannot ignore the questions of truth and ontology. Is a "spiritual dimension" product of the human mind, or are their effects of a power independent of brain activity? For the science of psychology, the crucial questions are: How can the subjective experience of a secret relationship between mind and body, consciousness and brain, spirit and soul become object of a psychological investigation or be part of a therapeutic intervention? Still, the deep human longing to handle and control existential powers by using a 'spiritual technique' produces a dilemma: by which method can the Absolute be managed?

### An example of spiritually extended psychology

One protagonist proclaiming a program of spiritual psychology is psychologist Lisa Miller, a well-known scientist and psychotherapist. She is directing the Clinical Psychology Program at Columbia University, Teachers College. She is also editing the new APA journal "Spirituality in Clinical Practice" and has edited the "Oxford Handbook on Psychology and Spirituality" (Miller 2012).

In this handbook, Miller wants to move beyond traditional psychology which she claims to be materialistic. She wants to build up a postmaterialist spiritual psychology which shall open the scientific awareness for an universe loving and guiding mankind. A key to get access to this universe for Miller is "spiritual perception" as a natural ability of consciousness. She is claiming that consciousness exists in states other than matter and that there exists a teleological process that is guided by the "source".

A deeper understanding of this phenomenon will only be possible from a "post material psychological perspective", which would lead to a perception of a sacred universe. Miller's starting point is the sacred, powerful, and ultimately intelligent, loving force of creation. In her experience, the universe is alive, sacred, and guiding: Her approach of a spiritual psychotherapy allows "spiritual perception: we create a loving space, which is available for sacred work that exceeds our expectations and fantasies" (3). In this handbook, spirituality is understood as ontologically real. Therefore, Miller wants to broaden the ontology: "A consciousness-driven psychology unites the human inner life and the surrounding physical events into a singular inquiry addressed by a range of formerly separate disciplines" (611).

In her book, Miller has succeeded in winning leading experts for their participation. Dr. Miller mentions that not all authors involved in the book agree on the thesis that spirituality should be understood as ontologically real, and this diversity is indeed visible in the different chapters. Several

chapters are rooted in the more common idea of psychology of religion and spirituality providing a well balanced overview. The ontological roots in the first section and the conclusion at the end are pointing in different directions.

Even with a lot of sympathy for a spiritually sensitive psychology: Miller's rationale for a spiritual psychology leaves behind scientific foundations. If the human mind is understood as an extension of a universal consciousness, this hypothesis is as a statement of faith which cannot be verified empirically or statistically. The handbook published by Miller is a good example that the process of spiritualization in psychotherapy is in some areas already advanced. These quotes above clarify the speculative basics of her conclusions which are grounded on a monistic world view. It is necessary to discern empirical facts and the worldview assumptions from where the facts will be analysed and interpreted. If you summarize it like Dr. Miller proclaims in her approach, the mixture transfers science into ideology. We need better models of integration between psychological facts and anthropological and theological hermeneutics to avoid misleading approaches like a "spiritual psychology".

#### The dilemma in the therapeutic office

Unless practitioners encounter patients who believe in ghosts, pray compulsively, or have eschatological expectations, with an understanding of the patient's cultural and religious characteristics, they risk unknowingly violating religion-specific taboos and boundaries. Therefore, at the point of psychiatric diagnosis, differential diagnosis and evaluation of medical history factors like religiosity and spirituality should be considered.

The search for meaning through secular and religious-spiritual perspectives is based on one's personal world view and subjective values. Until now these anthropological aspects have received too little attention in psychotherapy. Through the dissemination of mindfulness-based approaches, psychiatrists and psychotherapists have started to reflect differently on psychotherapeutic values and their ethics. For the purpose of adequately addressing spirituality, the therapist's values and basic assumptions as well as the implicitly mediated values within the respective psychotherapy should be reflected on.

Within the professional discussion on the inclusion of spirituality in psychotherapeutic treatment, one can find the follow-

ing viewpoints: While some authors recommend spiritual treatment methods, i.e. the inclusion of religious or spiritual teachings and practices on the basis of empirical evidence (Anderson et al. 2015); others, like the Austrian Ministry of Health warns against boundary transgressions and the abandonment of scientific standards and forbids esoteric content, spiritual rituals and religious methods in psychotherapy (Österreichisches Bundesgesundheitsministerium 2014).

Whereas the religious criticism and pathologization of religion and spirituality, which prevailed in earlier years, is now no longer appropriate, this critical attitude, however, should not be replaced indiscriminately by an idealization of this field. Psychiatry and psychotherapy can make an important professional contribution to the formulation of criteria for helpful religious or spiritual attitudes (Utsch et al. 2017).

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#### Bio sketch

Prof. Michael Utsch, PhD, honorary professor of psychology of religion at Tabor University in Marburg, lecturer at EZW in Berlin and head of the DGPPN section on religiosity and spirituality. (Bild: RPP Wien)

## Call for Recruitment

The EU project titled 'Enhancing Nurses Competence in Providing Spiritual Care through Innovative Education and Compassionate Care (EPICC)', needs to recruit 25 nurse educators from across Western Europe in order to develop and test an innovative, dynamic and flexible spiritual care matrix for nurse education based upon international best practice and evidence which can be adopted by Higher Education Institutions (HEI) across Europe. If you would like further information then please contact Professor Wilfred McSherry by E-mail [w.mcsherry@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:w.mcsherry@staffs.ac.uk).

## Announcements

### Meetings & Conferences

#### IGGS Annual Meeting together with 2<sup>nd</sup> National Conference on Spiritual Care

On the topic of chronic pain & spirituality. October 27-28, 2017; Zurich/Switzerland; further information to follow.

#### 6<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health and 5th International Conference of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality

On the topic of forgiveness and reconciliation in health, medicine and social sciences May 17-19, 2018; Coventry/England; for further information see [www.echrsh.eu](http://www.echrsh.eu).

#### Pre-Conference Research Workshop with Prof. Harold G. Koenig and other experts

May 13-16, 2018; Coventry, UK; for further information see [www.echrsh.eu](http://www.echrsh.eu)/echrsh-past-conferences or contact [rene.hefti@rish.ch](mailto:rene.hefti@rish.ch).

### Imprint

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