

Handbook of Religion and Health

Harold G. Koenig, Dana E. King and Verna Brenner Carlson

**Published by Oxford University Press 2nd Ed, 2012
1169 pages ISBN 978-0-19-533595-8. £105.**

Book Review by Dr Alison J Gray

At over 2kg and 1,100 pages this book is the biggest I have ever reviewed. It is in one sense the second edition of a book published in 2001, but also a continuation of what the book began. It contains everything needed for the fledgling researcher investigating the relationship between health and religion. The book has information on definitions and concepts, what we know and don't know, and the research tools available; it will be a big help in the planning of PhD and other research studies.

The authors are Professor Harold G. Koenig, from Duke University Medical center, Professor Dana E. King from The Medical University of South Carolina and Verna Brenner Carlson, associate professor of nursing, Towson University, Maryland.

This edition looks at all of the papers on the interface of religion and health published since the previous volume of 2001. The number of papers has gone up almost exponentially.

There are 30 chapters grouped as following:

1. Background
2. Debating religion's effects on health
3. Research on religion and mental health
4. Research on religion and physical health
5. Understanding the relationship between religion and physical health

There is an appendix that charts all the studies on religion and health by health outcome.

The papers have been categorized by type and given a rating according to the quality of the research.

This book is more like a library; few will read it cover to cover but anyone who is interested in the field will need access to a copy. The text is clear and well written, avoiding the repetition of many multi-author text-books.

Chapter 1 (history) summarizes the highlights of the development of medicine from pre-history to modern biomedicine. Chapter 2 draws out the challenges of research

in this area and the need for clear definitions. It makes clear why many researchers are more comfortable with 'religion' than the concept of 'spirituality'. The authors emphasize that although a broad definition of spirituality is useful in clinical practice, many such definitions are so broad as to be impossible to research, particularly when the definitions of spirituality overlap with features of good mental health.

Chapter 3 cuts to the chase. Titled 'Religion: Good or Bad' this chapter summarizes the benefits and the dark side of the religious belief. Religious systems have supported many people through their lives, bringing meaning, purpose, belonging and healing. Religions can also lead to division and negative consequences as a result of abuse and harmful teachings e.g. believers being encouraged to rely on faith to the exclusion of appropriate and effective modern medicine.

The authors emphasize that emotional and physical healing are part of all major religions, and that most people in the world follow a faith system of one form or another (Some hold that Buddhism is more of a philosophy of life than a religion; however, in this review when I refer to 'major religions' or 'faith systems' I am including Buddhism).

In Chapters 4 and 5 the authors consider the effects of stress on wellbeing and how the religions modulate this stress; Religious coping is used by many people around the world. The authors cite specific papers and it becomes clear that in many subject areas such research has mostly been done in North America, with some research in Europe and less elsewhere. This raises the question of how directly results from the USA can be imported into very different social situations.

Part Three summarizes the research on religion and particular mental health problems by diagnosis, while Part Four does the equivalent for physical health. Each chapter follows the same format, with a summary of the research to 2001 and then detailed information on more recent research, focusing particularly on the best quality papers. The authors summarize what is well established, and suggest where the next focus for research should be. These chapters are enlivened with case material and quotes from religious scriptures and from other authors. Here we again see the North American background of the authors, and a tendency to use Judeo-Christian materials, reflecting their clinical and personal experience.

The final part of the book is a chart of every single paper mentioned, under subject headings. The authors list investigators, type, method, number of subjects, population, location, religious variables, findings, control variables and a quality rating. This is an invaluable resource for researchers and authors, making it easy to find papers referring, for example, to people with depression in Slovakia, or general physical health in Kuwait, and through the quality rating we are given guidance on which papers to focus.

This book will give tremendous support to researchers in this area, providing summaries of the current knowledge base and written in a clear, accessible style. The highlights for me are the diagrams on pages 587 and 591 which set out the theoretical model of causal pathways to physical health from Western and from Eastern religions. These models capture the interaction between all of the factors

that influence health outcomes, with the final common pathway of immune, endocrine and cardiovascular effects on physical health and longevity.

It is clear throughout that the authors are North American and at times this biases the presentation and may alienate those from other cultures. Any financial information given tends to be from the US and will have little direct relevance to those of us elsewhere. Similarly the clinical cases mentioned are clearly from a US background, and there seems to be a bias towards quotes from the Judeo-Christian scriptures. The use of pie charts would have helped make the statistics and percentages more comprehensible.

This book is a thorough summary of the research and should be in every university library. It would be a useful personal investment for anyone working in this field, and will continue to be for many years to come. Some may find the price tag off-putting (£105 from Oxford University Press, or £241.24 today on Amazon; even the Kindle edition is £45).

The principle author, Professor Harold Koenig, has written several smaller books, which summarize the current research and are more accessible for general readers and those with more modest budgets (e.g. Harold G. Koenig, 2008, 'Medicine, Religion, and Health: Where Science and Spirituality Meet'. Templeton Science & Religion: West Conshohocken PA).

As further papers on the impact of religion and spiritual practices on health are submitted to journals round the world every day it will be interesting to see the size of the next edition of this excellent and essential handbook.