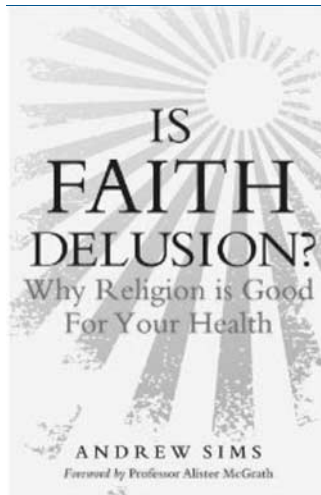


may simply indicate the need for a second text that develops the issues raised and begins to cover the ground that has been missed.

This book is valuable for people who are already interested in spirituality as it relates to psychiatry, but it is also a very useful introduction for those who might be more sceptical but open to the conversation.

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**Is Faith Delusion?
Why Religion is Good
for Your Health**

By Andrew Sims.
Continuum Books. 2009.
£14.99 (pb). 252pp.
ISBN: 9781847063403

This is another riposte to Richard Dawkins's best-seller, *The God Delusion*. Andrew Sims, who is a Christian psychiatrist, confronts the word delusion in Dawkins's attack on the supposed irrationality of religious belief. In this devoutly religious, personal account Sims documents how psychiatrists' and psychologists' hostility to religion has lessened since he started practice. He supports religious psychiatrists who want to include elements of their faith in their work with those patients who share their beliefs. And he wants to show that religion is good for us in terms of improved health and well-being. So does it work? Well, yes and no.

Let me start with the no. Sims has a particular expertise in the descriptive phenomenology of mental illness. He cogently explains the technical meaning of delusion and how it cannot be applied to religious belief. In so doing, however, he risks setting up a straw man. Dawkins is not suggesting believers are mad in diagnostic terms. Rather, he uses the term delusion in an ironic attack on religious belief as illogical, silly and wishful thinking. So I wonder whether a long treatise on the precise diagnostic nature of delusion will do anything to undermine Dawkins' argument. Furthermore, it might just be a matter of pots *v.* kettles. Sadly, the word delusion has a long history in the mouths of Christians as a description for people without faith (see 2 Thessalonians 2:11). I also take issue with the distracting sub-theme 'why religion is good for your health'. It was not too good for the first Christian or for many of those martyred after him. Nor is the claim for the health benefits of religion particularly robust.¹ After adjustment for factors such as social support, such benefits are small. Sims is right to assert that religion is not harmful to your mental and physical health, but to suggest it is good for you is a shakier claim, at least in terms of evidence. Faith does not take you out of the world any more than it makes you comfortable or safe. As Terry Eagleton puts it, to treat God as a 'super-sized version of ourselves that we might then manipulate to our own ends turns faith into idolatry.'² Jesus was so completely good in

terms of love and justice that he threatened the power of organised religion. Religious men could not bear to do other than kill him and he explicitly warned that others who followed his path might meet similar fates. To quote Eagleton again, 'The message of the New Testament is that if you don't live you are dead, and if you do, they will kill you.'² But the hope it gives is that goodness and love have already prevailed and that love and meaning are sometimes to be found in the deepest suffering.

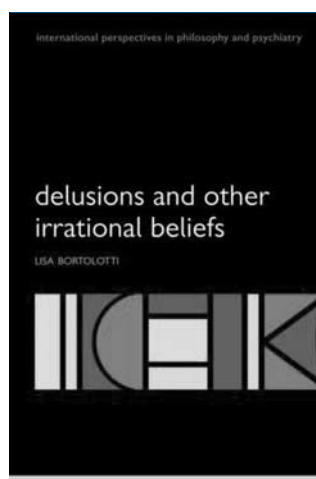
And now for the yes. This is a thoughtful history of the struggle between religion and secular psychiatry. Those of us with rational thoughts and romantic emotions cannot live without faith in God. And as Sims demonstrates, faith and belief can be integral parts of psychiatric practice because, for all our pharmacological, cognitive and analytical tinkering, only faith and hope will change men's hearts. Furthermore, as Sims points out, science does not rule out faith any more than believers can prove the existence of God. They are simply complementary spheres. This personal account is also extremely frank and for that reason highly interesting. It is rare for a psychiatrist to write with so much emotion on his sleeve and for that reason alone it is to be welcomed.

My problem is that I agree with Sims and Dawkins. Paul Tillich, an existential philosopher and theologian who is neglected today, sought to show throughout his writings from the 1940s to the 1960s how 'the Christ' pointed far beyond religion, to something reflected in, but more profound than, the concrete icons of world faiths, including Christianity. Tillich called it our 'ultimate concern', a God that could not be grasped but only hinted at. Therefore perhaps the materialists come closest to what might be 'the truth' as they dismiss religious belief and practice as so much nonsense. Who knows? If you seek certainty, you can go with Sims or Dawkins as both are sure they are right.

- 1 Sloan RP, Bagiella E, Powell T. Religion, spirituality, and medicine. *Lancet* 1999; **353**: 664–7.
- 2 Eagleton T. *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics*. Blackwell, 2009: 256.

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**Delusions and Other
Irrational Beliefs**

By Lisa Bortolotti.
Oxford University Press. 2009.
£34.95 (pb). 320pp.
ISBN: 9780199206162

This is probably the best treatise in recent times on the subject of delusions. Bortolotti brings her professional expertise to bear on a subject that is central to our understanding of what it means to be severely afflicted with schizophrenia or any psychosis. What is remarkable is that Bortolotti has mastered the literature on delusions as a psychopathological phenomenon. She does not treat delusions merely as an excuse for high-flown philosophical