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Book Review

By Elnaz Zahed, Psychotherapist

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos (2025). *Psyche and the Sacred: Integrating Mental Health and Spiritual Well-Being*. Boulder, CO: Sentient Publications. ISBN: 978-1-59181-350-7.

Abstract

This review examines Samuel Bendeck Sotillos's *Psyche and the Sacred: Integrating Mental Health and Spiritual Well-Being* (2025), a wide-ranging critique of the epistemological foundations of modern psychology and a sustained argument for recovering what the author calls a perennial "science of the soul." Sotillos contends that contemporary psychology, shaped by Enlightenment secularism, scientism, and the dominance of biomedical and diagnostic paradigms, has severed itself from its original concern with the *psyche* as soul. The book draws extensively on the wisdom of Christian mysticism, Sufi metaphysics, Vedāntic philosophy, Buddhist psychology, and Indigenous cosmologies to demonstrate that the integration of mental health and spiritual well-being is not a novel innovation but a restoration of an older, cross-cultural anthropology.

The review highlights the book's interdisciplinary and clinical relevance, especially its critique of the DSM/ICD frameworks, its reframing of the Enneagram and entheogenic practices within sacred traditions, and its challenge to the prevailing focus on symptom reduction at the expense of meaning and transcendence. It also notes limitations such as the book's composite structure, thematic repetition, and lack of engagement with empirical outcome research in spiritually integrated psychotherapy. Nevertheless, Sotillos's work is positioned as an important intervention in current debates on the decolonisation of psychology, the ethics of psychedelic therapies, and the need to recover metaphysical depth in therapeutic practice. The review argues that *Psyche and the Sacred* deserves the attention of clinicians, scholars of religion and psychology, and educators

seeking to cultivate culturally and spiritually responsive approaches to mental-health care.

Keywords: Sacred Psychology, Psychotherapy, Spirituality, Scientism, Sufism, Epistemology, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD)

1. Introduction: Psychology and the Crisis of Meaning

Modern psychology has long wrestled with the question of its identity. Is it a natural science, grounded in empirical observation and experiment? Or is it a human science, concerned with lived meaning and the subjective depth of experience? **Tracing the shift that occurred with the Enlightenment's privileging of scientia over metaphysics, Samuel Bendeck Sotillos' *Psyche and the Sacred* confronts this dilemma with both urgency and erudition, arguing that psychology has lost sight of its original subject—psyche as soul—by excluding the sacred from its foundations.**

In an era when global mental-health discourse is dominated by biomedical frameworks, neurochemical explanations, and evidence-based symptom management, Sotillos' intervention is both timely and provocative. **Drawing on Christian mysticism, Sufi metaphysics, Vedāntic and Buddhist psychologies, as well as Indigenous cosmologies, he proposes that the reintegration of the sacred is indispensable to any adequate account of the human person.** His central thesis is clear: psychology, in its current secular form, is ill-equipped to address the deepest sources of human suffering. By neglecting the spiritual dimension, the discipline risks collusion with the very malaise it seeks to heal.

2. Chapter Analysis

Chapter 1: Modern Psychology and the Loss of Transcendence

The opening chapter provides a historical and philosophical diagnosis of psychology's present impasse. Sotillos situates the discipline's secularisation within the intellectual shifts of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, when the metaphysical and theological dimensions of human life were progressively marginalised in favour of empiricism. What was once conceived as the study of the soul (*psychologia*) was redefined as the study of observable behaviour and, later, of cognition and neural activity.

Sotillos critiques this trajectory as a move from a sacred "science of the soul" to what he terms a **truncated epistemology**, shaped by **scientism** and the **Cartesian bifurcation** of mind and matter. He argues that such reductionism is embedded in the modern diagnostic frameworks of the **DSM and ICD**, which classify distress as mechanistic dysfunctions divorced from the spiritual horizon of the person.

Importantly, Sotillos is not nostalgic for pre-modernity; rather, he contends that something vital has been lost—the recognition of the human being as fundamentally oriented toward transcendence. Without this orientation, psychology risks treating suffering merely as malfunction to be technically corrected. For the practising psychotherapist, this analysis resonates strongly: clients often present not only with symptoms but with questions of meaning, purpose, and existential despair that extend far beyond current diagnostic criteria.

Chapter 2: The Inner and Outer Human Being

In this chapter, Sotillos examines the polarity between the inner and outer dimensions of the self, emphasising that a comprehensive psychology must engage both the embodied, social existence of the individual and the deeper life of spirit and soul. Drawing on Sufi metaphysics, Christian mysticism, and Vedāntic anthropology, he argues that the human condition cannot be reduced to externalised

behaviour or somatic symptoms without obscuring the inner dimension that provides coherence, meaning, and vitality to life.

Clinically, this perspective addresses a tension familiar to many practitioners: the pressure to prioritise observable behaviour and measurable outcomes over subtler processes of transformation. Sotillos challenges therapists to resist such narrowing, reminding us that genuine healing involves integrating the inner life rather than merely adjusting to external norms. His engagement with voices as diverse as Rūmī, Meister Eckhart, and Ibn ‘Arabī underscores the universality of this insight and prompts a critical reflection: do our therapeutic methods truly attend to the whole person?

Chapter 3: Realms of Consciousness and the Real

This chapter is perhaps the most philosophically demanding in the volume and represents the heart of Sotillos’s metaphysical argument. He traces the genealogy of modern psychology’s assumptions back to the **Cartesian dualism** that split reality into *res extensa* (extended matter) and *res cogitans* (thinking substance), relegating consciousness to a private, subjective domain detached from the ontological ground of being. Sotillos contends that this division not only impoverished Western metaphysics but also narrowed the horizons of psychology, reducing the psyche to neural or cognitive processes that can be measured but not fully understood.

In contrast, Sotillos highlights **pre-modern and non-Western traditions**—from Vedānta’s notion of Ātman as the witness-consciousness, to **Buddhist teachings on the luminous mind, to Sufi and Christian mystical perspectives on the heart-intellect**—which hold that consciousness reflects the **Real** itself, whether named God, the Absolute, or the Ground of Being. These traditions, he argues, offer a more integrated anthropology in which the subjective, psychic, and spiritual dimensions interpenetrate.

The **clinical implications** of this philosophical reframing are subtle yet profound. When consciousness is treated merely as an

epiphenomenon of the brain, therapeutic work tends to pathologise extraordinary experiences—mystical visions, dream life, symbolic imagination, or altered states—reducing them to symptoms of dysfunction. Sotillos proposes that by reclaiming consciousness as **ontologically significant**, clinicians can create space for therapeutic encounters that **validate spiritual experiences as authentic expressions of psychological life** rather than anomalies to be suppressed.

For practising psychotherapists, this chapter underscores the need for an expanded epistemology—one that neither romanticises non-ordinary states nor dismisses them as pathological, but discerns their potential role in meaning-making, transformation, and integration. Sotillos’s argument challenges practitioners to revisit inherited assumptions about mind, brain, and self, and to consider how therapy might facilitate a more holistic reconciliation between psyche and the Real.

Chapter 4: The Enneagram’s Science of the Soul

The Enneagram has often been **trivialised in contemporary popular culture**, reduced to a light-hearted personality quiz or an instrument for workplace team-building. Sotillos, however, **restores the symbol to its original spiritual context**, presenting it as part of the wider lineage of **sacred psychology** that aims at the transformation of the whole person rather than at the categorisation of types. He highlights its historical roots in the mystical traditions of the Middle East—particularly Sufi and Christian monastic lineages—where the diagram was regarded as a **map of the soul’s journey towards integration and return to the Divine**.

By tracing this lineage, Sotillos challenges modern appropriations that detach the Enneagram from its metaphysical horizon and thereby **diminish its ethical and transformative potency**. He contends that once stripped of its contemplative discipline and cosmological meaning, the Enneagram risks becoming yet another commodity in the therapeutic marketplace—deployed for personal branding or

relational coaching, rather than as a tool for genuine self-knowledge and spiritual growth.

For clinicians, this **recontextualisation is particularly instructive**. It prompts us to consider how therapeutic instruments—however promising—can be **co-opted by the culture of self-improvement** and, in the process, lose their capacity to address deeper existential needs. Sotillos’s treatment of the Enneagram serves as a **cautionary example of how psychology must remain vigilant against reductionist appropriation of spiritual tools**, and as an invitation to **engage such resources with respect for their contemplative and ethical traditions**.

Chapter 5: Entheogens and Sacred Psychology

This chapter tackles one of the most topical and contested developments in contemporary psychiatry and psychotherapy: the resurgence of psychedelic-assisted treatments for conditions such as depression, PTSD, and addictions. Sotillos situates this phenomenon within a longer history of the sacred use of psychoactive plants, noting that in many Indigenous and traditional cultures such substances—entheogens, literally “that which generates the divine within”—were administered within carefully structured ritual frameworks designed to orient the experience toward transcendence, ethical transformation, and integration into the life of the community.

Sotillos warns that the modern clinical revival, shaped largely by biomedical research protocols and the wellness industry, risks severing these substances from their ritual and metaphysical containers. In the absence of such a framework, the psychedelic experience can become a commodified consumer product or a fleeting altered state pursued for symptom relief or self-optimisation, rather than a means of genuine healing.

His critique is not a rejection of scientific exploration but a call for discernment: the power of these substances lies not in the pharmacological agent alone but in the intentional and sacred context

that guides the encounter. By neglecting this dimension, contemporary practice may expose vulnerable individuals to unintegrated experiences and fail to address the deeper existential wounds that underlie their suffering.

For clinicians, the timeliness of this chapter cannot be overstated. As psychedelic research moves from clinical trials to policy debates and therapeutic training programmes, Sotillos's analysis invites practitioners to reflect critically on the ethical, anthropological, and spiritual implications of these interventions. His argument underscores that genuine transformation cannot be engineered pharmacologically but requires frameworks that respect the sacred orientation of the human quest for transcendence.

Chapter 6: The Nature of True Well-Being

The concluding chapter offers a constructive vision that brings the book's earlier critiques into a forward-looking framework. Sotillos examines the prevailing discourses of self-care, wellness, and resilience that dominate both popular psychology and aspects of clinical practice. He argues that these trends, while often well-intentioned, tend to be superficial and commodified, focusing on stress-management techniques and temporary relief rather than on the deeper transformation required for authentic healing.

Central to Sotillos's thesis is the claim that true well-being cannot be separated from spiritual orientation. Healing is defined not merely as the alleviation of distress or the successful management of symptoms, but as the realisation of one's nature as a being fundamentally oriented toward the sacred. Such a perspective reframes therapy as a process of recovering meaning, integration, and transcendence—dimensions often overlooked in evidence-based approaches that prioritise measurable outcomes over qualitative inner change.

For psychotherapy, this chapter represents both a challenge and an invitation. It challenges the discipline's prevailing fixation on

symptom reduction and the promise of quick fixes, calling attention to the limits of purely technical solutions. At the same time, it invites practitioners to re-imagine their work as facilitating the unfolding of wholeness, honouring the client's existential and spiritual needs alongside psychological and relational health.

This final chapter thus positions *Psyche and the Sacred* not merely as a critique of the shortcomings of modern psychology but as a call to re-envision the aims of mental-health care itself—restoring the pursuit of human flourishing to its rightful spiritual and ethical dimensions.

3. Scholarly Contributions

The scholarly significance of *Psyche and the Sacred* lies in its interdisciplinary breadth. By weaving together insights from theology, philosophy, and comparative religion, Sotillos situates psychology within a wider intellectual and spiritual horizon. This challenges the insularity of mainstream psychology and opens space for dialogue with traditions that have long cultivated wisdom about the soul.

The book also participates in contemporary debates about the decolonisation of psychology. By foregrounding Indigenous and non-Western traditions, Sotillos challenges the dominance of Eurocentric models and reasserts the epistemic legitimacy of alternative cosmologies.

4. Clinical Implications

For practitioners, the book offers several important implications:

1. **Re-examining diagnostic frameworks** – Sotillos' critique of the DSM and ICD highlights the limitations of systems rooted in materialist assumptions. These frameworks risk pathologising spiritual experience and narrowing therapeutic vision.

2. **Distinguishing stabilisation from healing** – The book reinforces the difference between symptom management and genuine transformation. True healing requires reconnection with meaning and transcendence.

3. **Resisting the therapy marketplace** – Sotillos warns against the proliferation of ever-new modalities, which often commodify suffering rather than address it at its roots.

4. **Reclaiming perennial wisdom** – For clinicians, the book is a reminder that authentic therapeutic practice must be grounded in traditions that speak to the fullness of human nature.

These implications are not abstract but existentially urgent. As therapists, we encounter daily the “soul’s cry” for reconnection with the sacred—a cry that cannot be answered by technique alone.

5. Critical Reflections

The book is not without limitations. Its composite nature leads to some repetition of themes, particularly around the critique of scientism. Readers looking for empirical studies or practical clinical guidelines may find the absence of data frustrating.

Yet these limitations are also instructive. Sotillos is not offering another model to be slotted into the therapeutic marketplace. His aim is to challenge the very foundations of the discipline and to call psychology back to its original vocation. Judged on these terms, the book succeeds.

6. Conclusion and Takeaway

As a psychotherapist and academic engaged in both clinical practice and the training of practitioners, I regard *Psyche and the Sacred* as a work of considerable importance. It invites us to interrogate the

philosophical assumptions underpinning our discipline and to re-situate therapeutic practice within a metaphysical horizon. For students, it provides a critical corrective to overly secular curricula. For clinicians, it opens the possibility of practising in ways that honour the whole person, rather than merely managing symptoms. For scholars, it offers a provocative challenge to the hegemony of secular, Eurocentric models of psychology.

The key takeaway is clear: psychology cannot fulfil its promise if it continues to deny transcendence. Sotillos demonstrates that without the sacred dimension, our work risks remaining fragmented—capable of alleviating symptoms but unable to address the deeper roots of human suffering. This book also reminds us that therapeutic practice must be contextualised within wider cultural and spiritual traditions if it is to speak to the whole person. It reinforces the importance of distinguishing between temporary stabilisation and genuine healing, the latter requiring reconnection with meaning, transcendence, and the Divine. Moreover, it cautions us against the proliferation of ever-new therapeutic modalities, urging instead a recovery of perennial wisdom that has long guided humanity toward integration and wholeness.

Ultimately, *Psyche and the Sacred* is not simply a book to be read. It is a call to reorient psychology itself—to recover what has been forgotten, to reconnect with the sacred, and to rediscover what it truly means to heal. Sotillos' work deserves serious attention from psychologists, psychotherapists, theologians, and all those concerned with the future of mental health in an age of profound spiritual crisis.

