



PHOTO: PA

Beware the Snare of 'Spirituality'

It may be 'spiritual' but is it good and is it godly?

GP **Jon Garvey** warns about divorcing truth from health

Danger afoot. If the spirituality itself needs healing, any temporary gain could become an eternal loss.

Doctors may bury their mistakes. But the purveyors of false spirituality send them to hell for eternity

It was such a small thing. An invitation to a meeting about healing and spirituality. Perhaps it was sent to me by the Christian organisers because our practice is a Christian one. Indeed, our practice ethos specifically recognizes 'the importance of physical, psychological and spiritual factors for health and wellbeing.'

The flyer seemed to endorse our ethos by seeking to identify how people's spirituality can be harnessed to bring about healing. It sought to enlist the help of the 'faith communities' (mostly, though not entirely, Christian in our area) in establishing the role of spirituality in health. And it sought to explore the different approaches these faith communities take in applying people's spirituality to healing. But something about it made me feel the emphasis was wrong.

I have no great argument with any of the individual aims. It is good to discuss spiritual matters. It is good to discuss healing. Even dialogue between people of different religions can be essential in civil society. But something is back to front in this discussion.

The impetus for the effort presumably comes from the secularisation of our society, and particularly of key areas like healthcare.

Surely the evidence is getting stronger that health is more than physical measurements and pills – we need as a society to acknowledge that personal and spiritual factors are important as well. To raise their profile can presumably only help both individuals and religion itself.

It is certainly true that medicine is being squeezed more and more into a rigid utilitarian mould. Wise practitioners are saddened by the simplistic idea that if we measure everyone's cholesterol and stop them smoking, then all will be well with the world. The NHS is being moulded by a modernist agenda.

'Life force'

But the irony is that this is happening at a time when society itself – apart from government and some bastions of the old intellectual Establishment – is leaving secular modernism behind. Doctors may have fallen into the habit of dismissing spiritual factors in illness. But patients certainly haven't. Outside of the surgery, they often ask themselves what they have done wrong to deserve illness. Church attenders will speak to their minister. Non-attenders will

Show them the door!

visit mediums, or spiritual healers, or psychic surgeons. And the very reason for the phenomenal growth of fringe practitioners from reflexologists to traditional Chinese herbalists is that these are perceived, usually wrongly, to be more in touch with 'spiritual' concepts such as the 'life force'.

Outside the medical area, the latest census records over 70% as claiming to be Christian (not to mention the minority faiths). Although in many cases this represents no more than a moral sympathy, other surveys show that around 60% regard themselves as 'believers', and many of the 25% who say they are agnostics would still affirm some kind of 'spirituality'. Religion may be sick in our culture, but Atheism as a popular belief is dead in the water, and always has been.

Historically, secularism as the Establishment's world-view is a recent, local and extremely temporary phenomenon. Ordinary people don't talk in spiritual categories, I suspect, for much the same reason that villagers in the middle ages didn't talk about their virtually pagan beliefs: they fear that those with power will disapprove. And that, of course, includes the disapproval of their doctors. And the doctors themselves fear the disapproval of their peers, so there is a conspiracy of silence.

But then, you might say, I ought to approve the idea of interested professionals coming together to affirm the importance of spirituality. But consider this: when the Gospel came into the world, virtually nobody denied the reality of the spiritual. But Jesus' message was that their spirituality itself was disordered and heading towards death.

Indeed in those days there were more people who denied the reality of the body than of the spirit. Fashionable opinion was that only the spiritual mattered. Just imagine a 1st century Christian doctor, converted from his belief in Plato's philosophical view that matter was unimportant, and eager to show that Christ was raised physically from death to save our bodies, as well as our souls, from judgement.

Do you think he would organise a conference for all those who believed in the reality of the flesh, to discuss how they applied the idea of physicality to health? Would he invite the Epicureans who

believed in physical pleasure as the highest aim in human life? Would he invite the Stoics who believed that punishing the body was the best way to spiritual health? The priest who presided at Dionysian orgies? The answer is obvious. He would say that Jesus came not to exalt physicality, but to heal it.

Healed of darkness

And is the situation so different in our day? Just because an influential minority denies the existence of the spiritual, does that place everyone else on an equal footing? Jesus did not come to exalt spirituality, but to heal it. He taught that by denying the claims of the one true God on their lives, men are living in spiritual darkness that can only be healed by coming to him. Most commonly this is not expressed by atheism, but by any faith that does not acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

As soon as you accept a dialogue about how different spiritualities deal with illness, then wittingly or unwittingly you are acknowledging Jesus as merely one possible answer amongst many. Human spirituality becomes the sacred altar on which Christ may, or may not be offered. Whereas the Gospel says that Christ is the sacred altar where alone the human spirit may find salvation. There is a big difference.

Equally man-centred is the very idea of 'using' spirituality as a tool for healing. It is spirituality itself that needs healing to bring about something more fundamental – eternal life. Ultimately it is truth that brings healing. Most of the time I use medical truth, gained from science, experience and ethical integrity to heal my patients. I guard that truth jealously from the errors of quacks, misguided relatives or entrenched medical opinion. I avoid referring patients to practitioners whose medical opinions are unsound.

But the Christian health worker will also be aware that spiritual truth – which means nothing more or less than the Gospel – is the only spiritual input that will truly benefit people in any area of their life. Spiritual truth is to be equally jealously protected from the error of man-made religions, because the consequences are far more serious. Doctors may bury their mistakes. But the purveyors of false spirituality send them to hell for eternity.

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Door
of
Hope

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