



**Theological Institute of the
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Ministry Programme

Human Context Project

Essay of Healing Agencies

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Outline

When I began this project it was my objective to investigate healing agencies¹ which were available to Christians in central Edinburgh. This information, I hoped would then allow me to compile a directory of Christianity-compatible healing agencies. Initially I thought that this would mean that I would simply flick through the service directories delivered to each door in Edinburgh (*Yellow Pages*, *Thomson Local Directory*, etc.) and ask around amongst my Christian friends and end up with a neat list of hospitals, clinics and surgeries at the physical medical science end of the healing spectrum (with perhaps a nod-of-the-head towards medicine's reluctantly acknowledged second-cousin-once-removed: psychiatry) and a fashionably short list of Christian churches which offer healing services once a month, at the spiritual end of the spectrum. Agencies offering New Age and Alternative (or Complementary)² Medicine would have been conveniently lumped together, briefly examined and even more quickly discarded on the grounds of being 'unsound' or 'dodgy' (a convenient phrase often used by Evangelical-Charismatic Christians for spiritual matters which threaten them). It took me by surprise then to find myself, not only reconsidering my attitudes to Alternative Medicine, but also questioning my understanding and belief in conventional medical science. The aim of this paper, then, is to outline my discoveries and highlight the practical and theological considerations which led to my conclusions.

Assumptions

It seems important to begin by briefly examining the two assumptions that I was carrying when I began this project; two assumptions which are not uncommon in contemporary Evangelical-Charismatic Christian circles. Firstly, I assumed that there are healing techniques and practices performed by some practitioners which are not permissible for use by Christians. This I based almost exclusively on spiritual and theological grounds. The belief being that there are some therapies which subscribe to a spirituality which is perceived as being, if not anti-Christian, then certainly contrary to that offered by Christianity, the most obvious example being techniques which involve spirit or energy channelling, e.g. Reiki.

The second assumption I was carrying was that the methodology employed by conventional³ (allopathic) medical science was unquestionably compatible with Christianity. This is a very typically Western assumption, which John Drane sums up very well when he points out that conventional medical science is fundamentally opposed to the Christian outlook. He writes "Christians have undermined their own integrity with the easy assumption that Christian values are identical with the values of modern western culture." (Drane, p.160) The reading I did around the subject of healing and New Age, and the reflection on my own experience prompted me to question both of these assumptions. It was interesting to observe that, having written on page one of my working document that I expected to look at hospitals and health centres alongside churches and alternative therapy centres, I ignored them, assuming that there was nothing to question, and that everybody would not only know where to find a hospital or their local GP, but also assume that this was perfectly normal.

I found three books very helpful in my investigations: on the subject of alternative medicine and the New Age, a book by Church of Scotland minister and former chaplain to the Christian

¹ By 'healing agencies' I mean individuals, projects, or organisations to whom one may be referred in their capacity as a prospective health-care giver.

² In this essay I shall use the term 'Alternative Medicine'. From my reading and interviews with people it seems that Alternative Medicine and Complementary Medicine are terms which can be used interchangeably.

³ 'Conventional' - note that even the use of this word is culture-specific to the Western Enlightened world. It suggests that the medical science way of practising healing skills is the best way and that all others, which do not subscribe to its philosophy and worldview are 'alternative'.

Fellowship of Healing in Edinburgh, Revd Ian Cowie, *Across the Spectrum: Spiritual Seekers Today*, and also the chapter on Healing in John Drane's book quoted above, *What is the New-Age saying to the Church?*. On the subject of questioning conventional medical science, a book by Ivan Illich called *Limits to Medicine - Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*.

A Critique of modern medicine

I visited my GP recently. When I arrived at the surgery I reported to the receptionist and was encouraged to take a seat in the waiting room, which was arranged at two rows of concentric circles around a table centrepiece strewn with out-of-date magazines. I had no longer sat down when the doctor appeared at the waiting room door and announced my name. Acknowledging me, he led me to his office, and stood hanging on to the door handle as I walked past, closing the door behind me. He invited me to sit down. He sat opposite me - a desk between us - and asked me how he could help me. What a position of power and authority. He was distanced from me: there no physical contact at any time during my visit, but neither did I feel there was any emotional contact either. I had a three issues I wanted to bring to his attention, however after we had discussed the first, he stood up and seemed keen to usher me out of his office. When eventually I did leave, I felt bruised. I had not felt heard. I had not felt as though he was interested in me or that he cared about me. I left feeling worse than I had when I went in.

John Drane reports that this experience is common:

Faced with the impersonal nature, the expense, the élitism - and, often, the ineffectiveness of modern medical science, is it any wonder that many people feel something is wrong? When clinical efficiency, pay cheques and patient hours seem to be the only things that matter, what has happened to the high ideals of the Hippocratic oath and medical ethics? Not all medics are like this, of course. But the fact that any of them are is a powerful indictment of the educational system that has produced them. (Drane, pp.136f.)

One of the most clear criticisms of medical science is its reductionist approach to the human body. John Drane again:

As a result of the all-pervasive influence of Enlightenment rationalism, two beliefs have predominated. The first is that the only things worth knowing are things that you can think about. This means that anything that cannot be quantified rationally - such as the emotions - will automatically be given a lower status than the 'hard facts' of scientific analysis. The second belief is that you understand how things work by taking them apart. As a result, anatomy and physiology are central to medical science. This encourages doctors to proceed on the unspoken assumption that a patient is little more than a collection of spare parts that still happens to be breathing. (Drane, p.137)

Ivan Illich is even more scathing about the medical profession. In *Limits to Medicine* he argues that not only is the effectiveness of medical science an illusion, but that also it often reduces, rather than promotes, the health of individuals, a phenomenon he calls *iatrogenic disease*.

Impressive medical technology, popularly satirised in the Monty Python sketch featuring the "machine that goes 'ping!'", has been combined with an 'egalitarian rhetoric' (p.22) to develop an impression that medical science is highly effective. But at the outset of his book, he

explains that over the last one hundred years doctors have influenced epidemics "no more profoundly than did priests during earlier times" (Illich, p.15). Examining various infections such as tuberculosis, cholera, dysentery and typhoid he points out that even before the use of antibiotics became routine each of these infections "peaked and dwindled outside the physician's control" (Illich, p.16). His explanation of this lies in part in the introduction of better housing, and more significantly in better auto-immune systems brought on through improved nutrition amongst the population:

For more than a century, analysis of disease trends has shown that the environment is the primary determinant of the state of general health of any population. Medical geography, the history of diseases, medical anthropology, and the social history of attitudes towards illness have shown that food, water, and air, in correlation with the level of socio-political equality and the cultural mechanisms that make it possible to keep the population stable, play the decisive role in determining how healthy grown-ups feel and at what age adults tend to die." (Illich, pp. 17-20)

Certainly there are conditions which have been influenced by medical intervention. In the case of infectious diseases the use of antibiotic drugs has been significant in the treatment and control of pneumonia, gonorrhoea, syphilis, malaria and typhoid. However this level of success is not experienced in every aspect of modern medicine:

The pain, dysfunction, disability, and anguish resulting from technical medical intervention now rival the morbidity due to traffic and industrial accidents and even war-related activities, and make the impact of medicine one of the most rapidly spreading epidemics of our time. Among murderous institutional torts, only modern malnutrition injures more people than iatrogenic disease in its various manifestations. In the most narrow sense, iatrogenic disease includes only those illnesses that would not have come about if sound and professional recommended treatment had *not* been applied... In a more general and widely accepted sense, clinical iatrogenic disease comprises all clinical conditions for which remedies, physicians, or hospitals are the pathogens, or "sickening" agents. (Illich, pp.26f.)

On top of this clinical iatrogenic disease is what Illich refers to as *social iatrogenesis*. Again, I shall let him explain this:

Social iatrogenesis is at work when health care is turned into a standardized item, a staple; when all suffering is "hospitalized" and homes become inhospitable to birth, sickness, and death; when the language in which people could experience their bodies is turned into bureaucratic gobbledegook; or when suffering, mourning, and healing outside the patient role are labeled a form of deviance. (Illich, p.41)

Pain, sickness and suffering affect us all. They often leave us with an uncomfortable silence in which we are left struggling to find an answer or reason for our experiences. Historically, more 'primitive' cultures dealt with these questions on a social level, the illness of one person affected the lives and health of the community. We have already seen that the human body has been privatised, labelled and compartmentalised, health care has also been privatised on a social level. All sickness and disease is whisked away to be contained behind closed doors, by practitioners who speak a foreign language. While modern medicine may often become a noisy way of trying to hide those silences, they are still there.⁴

⁴ cf. Stanley Hauerwas *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (T&T Clark,

Even perfectly healthy people are called patients when they visit the doctor for 'check-ups' - the whole of life has been medicalized. It is viewed as odd, for example, if a perfectly healthy woman requests to have her baby at home rather than in the clinical setting of an hospital. Pregnancy is not a medical condition, it is a natural part of human life. Even death outwith a clinical setting is seen as abnormal, largely because death is seen as a failure - something to be fought against, every attempt made to reverse its effects. And yet death is part of life, and a good death is a healthy death, and may well be the concluding act that a person has control of and exercises on their way to wholeness.

An holistic approach

The reductionist approach of modern medicine leaves many people feeling lost and powerless. It is no wonder that John Drane writes: "Today more than ever before, people are taking it for granted that if they want to be truly healthy, then the last place to go for assistance will be the doctor's office" (Drane, p.137) As a result more and more people are turning to so-called alternative therapies and medicines to treat their ills; they are also being turned on to the so-called New Age movement. An attraction is that these therapies are, on the whole, both holistic and preventative, that is they treat the person as a whole and aim to encourage a positive state of health. Rather than focusing exclusively on symptoms, alternative therapists understand the human body to be an organic whole in which the well-being of one part (whether it is physical, emotional or mental) affects the well-being of the rest of the body. They are also more aware of the environment and the interconnection between humanity and nature. Surely this is more in keeping with a Christian understanding of God's creation and the way that He meets us. It would appear not, according to some corners of the Christian community.

There are many techniques and practices which have been around for a long time: some such as osteopathy have been around for around a century, while others date back even further, such as herbalism (which can be traced back generations in the life of the Christian church, for example, St. Columba prescribed himself herbs). While some of these techniques have no connection at all with either a particular spirituality, and specifically with the New Age Movement, they have suddenly had the label 'New Age' stamped upon them and examined from new angles, and with new prejudices. It may be a case of labelling those things which we do not understand and feel threatened by. It may also be a case that the spirituality starved westerners, in their search for health and meaning have indeed turned their need for wholeness into a religion: the medicine has come to be worshipped and relied upon. In such cases those looking for healing do not find wholeness as they become dependent on one particular technique or another.

Are all alternative therapies bad for Christians?

The book I found most helpful in helping me answer this question was the book by Revd. Ian Cowie, former chaplain to the Christian Fellowship of Healing. Firstly he identified that human beings work on four levels: the highest being the level of spirit, through intellect and psyche down to the physical level of body; God, he points out meets us at every level. Because we work on all four levels, we are able to experience and exert influence over others on all four levels. This is important in both helping people to become whole, and in receiving healing from others. Later on he asks three fundamental questions to help us discern whether

a therapy is okay or not: is it occult? it is in a cluster? and is the practitioner on an ego-trip? Notice that each of these questions is asking something about the practitioner.

Is it occult? The word refers to that which is hidden, and refers to secret knowledge which gives one person power over another. Ian Cowie makes the point that simply because we do not understand something, it does not make it occult. Another question here is Can anybody do it, or learn to do it? If the practitioner is open to helping others develop the skills involved, then it questions whether the activity is occult or not.

Cluster Does this technique stand alone in the practitioner's interests and practices or is it part of a wider cluster of similar activities; activities which may be unhealthy - the practitioner's involvement in psychic activity may be detrimental in bringing healing to others, in fact it may allow what Ian Cowie calls 'psychic infection'. Cowie's simple rule however is "In judging the rightness or wrongness of any activity, look not only at the activity itself, but at the cluster of which it is part." (Cowie, p.43) Considering the therapy in isolation is as bad at allopathic medicine's reductionist approach to symptoms.

Ego-Trip Is the practitioner's motive a good one, or is (s)he using it to boost his/her ego? Cowie warns against practitioners for whom this is true, and adds a warning that the higher up the spectrum (that is the higher the level - with physical being lowest and spiritual at the top - the more dangerous it is. Simply because something may tempt someone into an ego-trip does not make that something bad in itself.

What we don't understand isn't bad

Besides these questions about the attitude of the practitioner we must balance questions about what worldview the therapy is relying upon. Many of the so-called New Age therapies focus on energy and energy fields, not only in the body, but also in the world and the universe as a whole: Reiki practitioners, for example, say that they are tapping into *ki* a Japanese word meaning 'life force energy'; other New-Agers talk about Ley Lines Other therapies talk about balance, and the Chinese idea of *Yin-Yang*. Ian Cowie has something valuable to offer here when he writes:

Just because some pearl of wisdom comes from another culture, and is not the complete Gospel, we should not therefore discard it or see it as demonic. We should rather look to see where it is fulfilled in Christ. (Cowie, p.77)

Similarly, simply because modern science has not proven that there is a pattern of energy-flow in the body, world or universe it does not mean that these do not exist, especially if the techniques which use these ideas actually work. After all, X-rays were there long before they were discovered and put to use by scientists. It is too simple and glib a reply to label them demonic. Ian Cowie again:

Because non-Christians perceive some truth or fact before Christians do, this does not mean that the insight is wrong.

Because Communists, Hindus or Buddhists have arrived at certain conclusions about the way human beings work, we cannot dismiss such insights out of hand. A valid insight into the working of the universe, and the human body or into the effects of certain herbs will naturally be explained in terms of the mythology of the society in which those concerned live. We can accept the insight without being bound by the myths. (Cowie, p.78)

It so happens that the cultural myth which has shaped western thinking over the last two hundred years or so, has been that of science. Modern culture (postmodern culture) is changing. Society is becoming sceptical about metanarratives and so becoming more open to other explanations of the world, about humanity and health. This will continue to grow.

Conclusion

Merely labelling something demonic because we do not understand it or because it does not fit into our understanding of the world does not make something bad. Certainly there are practitioners of alternative therapies who are involved in clusters of spiritualities which are clearly incompatible with a Christian understanding of the world and our responsibility to worship God through Jesus Christ, but there are many more who are not. I do not believe that I can now draw up a definitive list which says that a, b and c alternative therapies are good and wholesome and may be used by Christians, while x, y and z are not. Much of the decision depends on the attitude and openness of the therapist and whether the person receiving therapy is open to this kind of treatment⁵, as well as the degree to which their practice is involved in a cluster of other activities which many negatively affect the effectiveness of their treatment, or which may lead to psychic infection.

⁵ cf. article by Revd Jenny Williams, current chaplain of the Christian Fellowship of Healing, entitled "What language are you speaking?: A model to help Christians relate to complementary therapies" in which she uses a model of language to help us relate to alternative therapies - to some languages we feel an affinity and are open to those, while others we are not. She argues that we will respond better to those therapies which we feel are closer to our own worldview.

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