

'From the Chair'

Reflections on the SIG Programme November 20th 2009 'Spirituality and Religion – Friends or Foes?'

Professors Kate Loewenthal, Patricia Casey and Douglas Davies provided us with three stimulating and diverse perspectives on the relationship between spirituality and religion. The quality and flow of the discussion was ample testimony to the food for thought with which we were provided.

At the beginning of the day, Kate Loewenthal provided us with a fascinating perspective from inside Orthodox Judaism. From this perspective it could be seen that spirituality and religion are inseparable. The life and experience of the Orthodox Jew is spiritually and religiously boundaried and exists in separation from wider society, whilst still engaging with it economically, politically and in other pragmatic ways. This makes it easier for most of us to view objectively from outside, but it was the insight into the subjective experience of this spirituality that was most illuminating for me - a subjectivity remarkably similar to some traditions within Christianity and other religions.

Perhaps many of us will have identified most with Patricia Casey's reflections from the perspective of psychiatric, medical and scientific research. Can spirituality be scientifically measured? Do we inevitably end up measuring psychological variables under the heading of 'spirituality'? Should we really focus on religiosity as a more objective measure? (Perhaps this would make some sense, as spirituality is usually seen as being more subjective than religion.) If we can measure both spirituality and religiosity, which might have the most impact on mental health outcomes? Patricia left us in no doubt that, whatever the methodological issues, we were dealing with something which had an important objective and subjective impact upon mental health.

Douglas, as anthropologist and theologian, gave us quite a different perspective to consider. Perhaps it is only when we can put objectivity and subjectivity to one side, and consider what exactly spirituality and religion mean to us, that we can begin to understand what the differences between them might be. Both spirituality and religion are concerned with finding meaning and meaning does not arise only from scientific research. Whilst both might be difficult to define, that is not to say that we don't understand what they mean to us in practice.

The day ended happily with a launch of the SIG book, 'Spirituality and Psychiatry', and a toast to the SIG on its 10th anniversary. The book contains diverse perspectives on spirituality and religion and it has been in the mutual engagement of these perspectives that the authors and editors have grown in their own understanding of what spirituality means in psychiatric practice. I am sure that this will have indirect benefits for all our patients. More directly, I think that we are all enriched spiritually by the sharing that this day conference, and the book, represents.

Professor Chris Cook