

PERVERSE SPIRITUALITY

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I am going to talk about an aspect of the spiritual experience that interacts with psychiatry; occasions when the impulse to spirituality is misused by another to lay that individual open to control and misuse. The consequent distress is often identified as needing psychiatric help and these individuals may indeed benefit from psychological help. However, psychiatry as a discipline interested in brain and in mental mechanisms may have difficulty responding in a congruent manner to the spiritual issue, and this difficulty can make the situation worse.

I became interested in this issue through my contact and work with people who have had a range of experiences. I have worked with people who have been through cults both secular and religious including, of religious groups, the '9 o'clock service' in Sheffield, and Satanist groups. A number of my patients who have experienced abuse and exploitation outside such formal group settings find it easiest to describe their experience as an attack on their soul. I am suggesting it may be useful to think of them as suffering control and misuse as a perversion of their impulse to establish a spiritual identity. To help them recover from the consequent emotional and psychological disturbance, one must be prepared to enable restoration of normal spiritual development.

Many reading this will have no difficulty thinking of the spiritual aspects of the self as integral to its complete being. However, in the Special Interest Group we have struggled to find a simple way to define spirituality, and others seem to have the same difficulty. The search for a way to express spirituality in one's daily conduct may be something we could all agree is important, and the character of such a 'spiritual life' is rather more readily described than reaching a definition of the term itself. In the Christian tradition, the Sermon on the Mount is an extended exposition of the spiritual life. St Paul in his letter to the Colossians gives a briefer account, while later writers include St Augustine and Thomas a Kempis. The Advices and Queries of the Society of Friends is a modern version in the same tradition and the only contemporary attempt in the Christian tradition of which I am aware formally to set out to describe the spiritual life.

Broadly, all these come up with the same plan. Life should be lived in the consciousness of a need to accept that while its full purpose cannot be known, it is directed towards something higher than personal gratification. For Christians and people of many other religious faiths, the purpose is known to God, although to some it may remain inscrutable.

Good and evil, right and wrong exist and can be discerned by those adherent to a sound faith; falling short in this may allow error. All this requires a degree of self-discipline and reflection, and a willingness to suffer emotional and physical privation. Others may fail to understand or may criticise the endeavour, which should bind one more firmly to the task as a personal testimony to the good that may come from it. Understanding and adhering to the scriptures is a necessary aid in the process.

Whether or not we agree with the values an individual ascribes to the discipline to which he or she adheres, we would probably see such a life as more admirable than otherwise. Many people with or without religion do pursue such a path to good effect. However, in my experience, such normal impulses to discover a spiritual life can also be perverted by the influence of others wishing to exploit it.

What do I mean by perversion? By perversion, I intend to convey the misdirection of a healthy impulse or drive. This is like the psychoanalytic notion that instinctual drives are undifferentiated in children but acquire an adult, fruitful, direction through appropriate learning. In vulnerable people, those who abuse them can exploit drives, as with the misuse of the drive to attach in children. The impulse to develop spiritually can be exploited in just this way, through being perverted to engage someone in a damaging spiritual journey.

To illustrate this, I want to use a clearly codified guide to the spiritual life to explore my clinical example. I can find none better spelled out than the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism. I believe the structure it offers could be applied well to any attempt to describe the spiritual life. The precepts of the Eightfold path are grouped as follows:

Wisdom, comprising:

1. *Right Understanding*, of the four noble truths of Buddhism:
 - All that is created is impermanent, and inherently ill (causes suffering)
 - Ill (suffering) arises from ignorance and craving sensual pleasure
 - Ceasing of Ill (suffering) is Nirvana, the realisation of truth
 - Knowledge of the Eightfold path leads to Nirvana

This central belief, the 'given', of Buddhism is achieved, as the fourth point says, through adherence to the further disciplines of:

2. *Right Aspiration*

Morality, comprising

3. *Right Speech*
4. *Right Action*
5. *Right Living*

Concentration, comprising

6. *Right Effort (striving for states of mind)*
7. *Right Mindfulness (seeking calm withdrawal from the imperfect)*
8. *Right Ritual*

I don't intend to discuss the steps themselves; assume that to some extent what they intend is self-evident. (For a helpful discussion, read 'The Four Noble Truths' by Venerable Ajahn Sumedho, Amaravati Publications 1992). Here, I am using them to illustrate a general point: that the steps devised to

help one to live a virtuous and admirable life, can be hard to distinguish from the steps used to lead a person into abuse and exploitation.

I am thinking of a young woman who became a patient of mine as she struggled to deal with the consequences of living for years in a cult. She had been recruited in her early adult life as she sought to find a way forward following a very traumatic upbringing. She was sustained by her principled interest in ecology and in issues of justice. Not surprisingly, she felt the world to be in need of improvement.

She was attracted to the cult by their publicity, describing themselves as an agricultural community, which shared property in common and sought to develop a better way to live. They rejected the conventional culture as materialist and corrupting, aspiring to devote themselves to a life of mutual commitment and growth. Good would flow from the testimony of their principled and disciplined lives. This was their central belief, which was achieved through following a range of disciplines.

'Right Understanding' - The leader of the cult encouraged them to challenge their own understanding, to question what of their beliefs were sound and what had been tainted by conventional thinking. It was at all times possible to slip back into thinking not conducive to personal growth. Great discipline was required to correct this.

'Right Aspiration' - Members were encouraged to maintain a firm grip on the goal of renouncing ordinary understanding and discovering a true understanding of the nature of things. The leader of the cult was the arbiter of what was 'true understanding.' Letting go of conventional thinking and attitudes was recognised to be difficult and to require constant endeavour.

'Right Speech' - Certain ways of expressing oneself were appropriate; others gave evidence of failure to make progress. Speech was monitored and corrected in individual and group sessions.

'Right Action' - The cult required certain domestic duties of each of its members including child-care in the communal nursery. Child-care entailed oversight of harsh 'disciplinary' measures administered to the children. People went out to work, giving their earnings to the cult. Personal service to the cult leader was considered a particular privilege. This would eventually include sexual service.

'Right Living' - The cult required a strict adherence to a disciplined lifestyle, with abstaining from intoxicants and strict vegetarianism. Failure to live up to the ideals led to disciplinary measures, which would result in loss of sleep and being expected to perform arbitrary duties at any time. Struggling with the necessary self-control, especially the showing of emotional responses, was itself a cause for discipline.

'Right Effort' - At all times the individual had to strive to maintain and further the objectives of the cult. Showing doubt or dissent was reacted to with great hostility as potentially damaging to the task. Those who fell short were left in

no doubt of this. The rules and expectations could change and vary arbitrarily, but doubt or questioning produced criticism and attack.

'Right Mindfulness' - At all times the state of mind should be committed to the goals of the group. Mental doubts and dissent were as bad as those openly expressed, and might be suspected at any times. My patient became conscious of checking herself all the time, screening out independent thoughts. When the idea of leaving occurred to her she had to avoid thinking of it for fear of being detected.

'Right Ritual' - At all times behaviour must meet the ideal, as set out by the leader. All conduct became automatic and driven by the fear of criticism. Failure became unbearable as the individual felt she would be letting the cult down, and since frightening and degrading reparation would be exacted.

This cult did not refer to the eightfold path but I have utilised it here to illustrate the fact that someone committed to abusing another's spiritual needs can mimic the steps of even so great and well respected a spiritual code. Central to this process was the leader of the cult, an able and disturbing character, who had a good understanding of peoples' spiritual craving.

My patient was exposed to systematic exploitation of her self-doubt and lack of confidence, and to emotional and physical terrorism if she failed to meet expectations. She was led to believe that her failure to feel content or helped was a sign of her spiritual poverty, to be fought against. Her social isolation was cultivated so that it was easy to convince her that there was nothing of value outside the cult, and no one who would understand her or want her. Her initial healthy impulse to follow a path to her own spiritual development was perverted to damage her profoundly. The consequence was years of traumatic amnesia, and then of psychiatric treatment. Her psychological disturbance was an understandable, if ultimately maladaptive, attempt to cope with this parasitic invasion of her sense of self.

Comparable patterns of high jacking the elements of the spiritual life can be seen in experiences as diverse as the young people attending 'the 9 o'clock service', Patty Hearst's experience with the Symbionese Liberation Army, or for someone in a Satanist cult. People who have suffered sexual and physical abuse may describe feeling that their soul is stolen or damaged. Each is having their capacity to strive to high ideals and a principled life taken over and abused in a perverse way.

Part of the power of the kind of experience that my patient endured lies in that normal and admirable impulses are being recruited. The individual feels blamed for responding, just as the victim of sexual abuse feels guilt if her body responds with arousal to what is done. Recovery needs the recognition that part of the abuse is this engagement of normal impulses to perverse ends.