

EXAMINING OUR SPIRITUAL SPECTACLES: DANGERS AND PITFALLS

Dr. Sunil Raheja

I have to start by apologising for the negative title. Why should examining our spiritual spectacles be about dangers and pitfalls? Are not all spiritual experiences equally valid and to be unequivocally encouraged? What right do I have to comment on your spiritual experience and you on mine?

I'm sure many of us remember The Prince of Wales' keynote speech to the Royal College Annual Meeting ten years ago, when he raised the important issue of how spiritual issues needed to be considered by psychiatrists. The very existence of this special interest group is testimony to a sea change sweeping through the heart of psychiatry, if not western society itself, with regard to spirituality. And yet, I would argue, we must not stop at 'spirituality' per se. We need to raise and talk through areas that may be uncomfortable and even threatening.

These issues are uncomfortable and threatening on both a societal level and on a personal level. Yet, if we choose to ignore or suppress them, then we ourselves will be at risk of becoming guilty of the shortsightedness that has caused psychiatry to ignore spirituality for so long.

As human beings we have a unique capability not shared by any other species and that is the power of self-awareness. We don't just have the capability of thinking, but we can stand back from ourselves. We can, as it were, think about our own thinking. Taking the title of this talk then, we can look at the very spectacles through which we see the world. We can stand objectively back from our paradigms and when they do not fit with reality we can change those paradigms.

That is unique to us and, it has been suggested, one of the main reasons why we have developed and progressed this far as the human race. It is the reason why we can evaluate and learn from others' experiences as well as our own.

Let me quote from Steven Covey, a contemporary self-development teacher, who points out, '*we are not our feelings. We are not our moods. We are not even our thoughts. The very fact that we can think about these things separates us from them and from the animal world. Self-awareness enables us to stand apart and examine the way 'see' ourselves*'.

That is all well and good, but it is not the whole picture. We like to imagine ourselves as neutral and impartial, particularly in our professional capacity as psychiatrists. But the reality is that all of us come with our own particular biases and prejudices. The history of medicine is littered with such prejudices. Indeed, it is now part of the rationale for evidence-based practice. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see how tenaciously held views and opinions are later on proved to be incorrect.

Take, for example, the case of Dr. Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis, an Austrian obstetrician living between 1818 and 1865, who cut the death rate from infection on his labour ward from 11.4% in 1846 to 1.3% in 1848 by insisting that staff wash their hands when going from the dissection room to the delivery room. When his theory was made public, his accreditation was withdrawn and he was committed to a lunatic asylum. (His case was not helped by the fact that he also developed tertiary syphilis later in life and so it

was presumed that everything he said was deranged). But, if you will excuse the pun, they ended up throwing the baby out with the bathwater!

The issue has been an inability and unwillingness to look objectively at strongly held beliefs and views. When we come to the issue of spirituality, the need for self-awareness is greatly increased.

Religion and personal spirituality are one of the last taboos in Western society. Defence mechanisms and pre-judgements are very quick to surface when these subjects are discussed. I myself speak to you with my own particular slant and reference point. I come as a British Asian western-trained psychiatrist, brought up in a Hindu culture and environment, who from my late teens has come to a personal faith in Jesus Christ. That faith has sustained me for the last 17 years and I can see no reason why it should not continue to do so for the rest of my life. Through my own research and reflection, I have come to regard the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. These are the spiritual spectacles through which I am viewing the world and through which this presentation comes to you.

Some of you may be tempted to label me as misguided or worse, some may have sympathies with this viewpoint and others may regard themselves as neutral.

But it is imperative to see that all of us, no matter how impartial we like to imagine ourselves, come with our own deeply held views, paradigms, experiences and prejudices. And by prejudice we mean literally pre-judgment, that is, making a judgment before exploring all the alternatives.

The challenge for us is how will future generations look at our tightly held views. I propose in the time that we have to look at three dangerous assumptions to do with spirituality.

Assumption One: all religions and spiritualities are equally valid.

As psychiatrists we have ethical guidelines by which we are told not to bring religious or spiritual issues into treatment when it is counter to the patient's belief system, nor should we attempt to discredit the patient's belief system. These are good and laudable aims, but do not give a complete picture of the situation. Such guidelines are generally interpreted to mean that a religious psychiatrist should not impose his or her religion upon a secular humanist patient.

However, think about the converse. Here I quote Scott Peck in his address to the American Psychiatric Association as distinguished Psychiatrist Lecturer, on 4th May 1992 (nine years ago to this very day):

'What about the secular humanist psychiatrist who attempts to impose his or her secular humanism upon a religious patient? That imposition is so frequent as to be almost standard, and is made by large numbers of psychiatrists, overtly or covertly, without their even being aware of it.'

The spectacles through which psychiatry has looked has meant that spirituality is at best regarded as an irrelevance and at worst as a dangerous malaise. Once again, to quote Scott Peck:

'Psychiatrists tend not only look upon all religion as inferior and pathological, but also to be oblivious to the fact that they themselves may have a spiritual distance to travel'.

Assumption Two: religion is the same as spirituality.

Acute psychiatric wards up and down the country have a number of patients who in their acute psychosis or mania will profess to be God or Jesus Christ or Mohammed or Buddha or some other special spiritual person. Elsewhere, various terrible atrocities are done in the name of religion around the globe.

What a number of our psychiatric colleagues have done, metaphorically speaking, is once again to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Because of their negative experience, many completely discount religious and spiritual experiences alike.

The association in some instances of religious belief with bizarre behaviour, as well as what would be generally labelled as evil, has led to an assumption of causation rather than association. And yet there is clearly much more to religion, spirituality and behaviour than such simplistic observations would propose. We know this instinctively and yet few of us think this through.

Returning again to Scott Peck, he has suggested four stages of spiritual development rather analogous to Freud's stages of psychosexual development.

The first stage Scott Peck labels '*chaotic/antisocial*'. This may be thought of as a stage of lawlessness, lacking any form of spirituality. This presumably underpins a good deal of the western secularism that dominated so much of the twentieth century. Its roots can be traced back to writers like Nietzsche who famously quoted, 'God is dead. We killed Him'. Nietzsche himself prophesied that because of this wide scale rejection of God, the twentieth century would become the bloodiest century in history. Furthermore, western secularism, with all its determined suppression and indifference to God and spirituality, has produced a growing hunger and thirst for something more and greater than this world can provide.

To explain further, I need to refer to the Christian writer John Piper, whom I feel articulates this well. '*The world has an inconsolable longing. It tries to satisfy the longing with scenic vacations, accomplishments of creativity, stunning cinematic productions, sexual exploits, sports extravaganzas, hallucinogenic drugs, ascetic rigors, managerial excellence, et cetera. What does this mean?*'

Here Piper turns to CS Lewis, arguably one of the finest spiritual writers of the twentieth century: '*If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.*'

Elsewhere, CS Lewis expands, '*it was when I was happiest that I longed the most. The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing...to find the place where all the beauty came from.*'

Scott Peck labels the second stage as '*formal/institutional*', which may be thought of as a rigorous adherence to the letter of the law and attachment to the forms of religion. This is institutionalised religion. It offers structure and tradition but conversely is rigid and unbending. The longings to which CS Lewis alluded in our earlier reference are submerged in an adherence to religiosity. It has been described as 'a form of godliness, but denying its power'.

It is this group of people who are frequently perceived negatively by society as large. An interesting study by Allport and Ross from Harvard

(Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 1967, vol. 5, No.4, 432-443) looked at personal religious orientation and prejudice. They drew three conclusions concerning the relationship between subjective religion and ethnic prejudice (and one suspects that their findings would translate across all religious groups). The findings make sober reading:

- 1) On average, churchgoers are more prejudiced than non-churchgoers.
- 2) This relationship is curvilinear; that is, while most church attendees are more prejudiced than non-attendees, a significant minority of them are less prejudiced.
- 3) It is the casual, irregular fringe members who are high in prejudice; their religious membership is described as of the *extrinsic* order. By contrast, it is the constant, devout, internalised members who are low in prejudice; their religious motivation is described as being of the *intrinsic* order.

From this third finding, they amplify a fourth point, that a certain cognitive style permeates the thinking of many people in such a way that they are indiscriminately pro-religious and, at the same time, highly prejudiced.

Scott Peck has labelled the third stage of spiritual development '*sceptic/individual*'. He argues that the majority of psychiatrists are stage three people. By this he means a stage of principled behaviour, but one characterized by religious doubt or disinterest. This contrasts with inquisitiveness about other areas of life, an inquisitiveness that does not ultimately satisfy.

Let me turn again to John Piper, quoting CS Lewis. '*The tragedy of the world is that the echo is mistaken for the Original Shout. When our back is to the breathtaking beauty of God, we cast a shadow and fall in love with it. But it does not satisfy. The books or music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we look to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things - the beauty, the memory of our own past - are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself. They are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited*'.

This realization leads to the fourth stage that Scott Peck describes, the most mature of the stages and which he labels as '*mystical/communal*'. He feels that this is a state of the spirit of the law, as opposed to stage two, which tends to be one of the letter of the law. To use the language of Allport and Ross, it is the peak of developed intrinsic faith; a mystical experience of the soul that, when you have tasted it, you realize nothing in this world can match it. It paradoxically satisfies like nothing in this world and at the same time creates a hunger and thirst for more of the experience. This is hard to explain and yet is found in all the great spiritual literature of the world. Here is a succinct description from the writings of the nineteenth century English preacher, Spurgeon.

'Some of us know what it is to be too happy to live. At one point, the love of God was so overwhelmingly experienced by us on one occasion that

we almost had to ask God to stop the delight. If He had not veiled His love and glory for a bit we would have died for joy'.

Assumption Three: that God is ultimately not knowable.

So much of modern day spiritual thinking seems to be preoccupied with mankind's search for God through making effort, or good deeds, or meditation. And yet brave or foolhardy is that man or woman who says they have found God.

Would this not be presumption or false humility? It is, at least, how it would appear to be, as viewed through contemporary spiritual spectacles.

I would argue that it is something much more basic than that. The danger in searching for God is that we may actually find Him, or rather that He may find us. The next question then becomes 'Where will that put me? What are the implications for my life, if I were really to meet God?

Let me take two examples to illustrate this. First is the case of Malcolm Little. While in prison for armed robbery, and having narrowly escaped death, he encountered Black Muslim teaching. This is how he described it:

'I had sunk to the very bottom of the American white man's society when - in prison - I found Allah and the religion of Islam and it completely transformed my life....'

Changing his name to Malcolm X, this was not the end of his spiritual experience. Visiting Mecca a few years later he gained new insights that challenged and changed him deeply. Here is what he wrote to his friends back in the United States. *'You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to rearrange much of my thought patterns previously held and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions.... During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug) - while praying to the same God - with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the "white" Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana. We were truly all the same (brothers) because their belief in one God had removed the "white" from their minds, the "white" from their behaviour, and the "white" from their attitude.'*

These insights had deep personal consequences for Malcolm X. When he returned from Mecca he wrote, *'since I learned the truth in Mecca, my dearest friends have come to include all kinds - some Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics and even atheists! I have friends who are called capitalists, socialists, and communists! Some of my friends are moderates, conservatives, and extremists. Some are even Uncle Toms! My friends today are black, brown, red, yellow and white!'*

The tragedy was that shortly after making this statement, Malcolm X was assassinated, allegedly by Black Muslim opponents of his changing views.

The premise I am putting here is that God *is* knowable, but the consequences of knowing God may not always be in keeping with the ideas

and preconceptions of the society and cultural group that surrounds us. In fact the consequences can be highly dangerous.

I close with a final quote from CS Lewis, which I think captures this well.

'An impersonal God - well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads - better still. A formless life force surging through us, a vast power, which we can tap - best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps, approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband - that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly; was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ('Man's search for God!') suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us?'

(From: C. S. Lewis, "Miracles" New York: Macmillan, 1960 p.94)

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