

Workshop Report by Gillie Jenkinson

The Royal College of Psychiatrists Centre for Advanced Learning and Conferences
Spirituality and Clinical Psychiatry: Training and Practical Issues for Mental Health
Practitioners. Organised by the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group
Friday 1st March 2013

'Pathological Spirituality'

Introduction

This workshop was based loosely on Chapter 13, *'Pathological Spirituality'* by Crowley and Jenkinson, in *'Spirituality and Psychiatry'* (Cook et al. 2009). References from Chapter 13 will be by page number only.

In this paper I will briefly define the positive aspects of spirituality; discuss what can go wrong with spirituality; define 'cult'; define 'evil'; look at what a former cult member might look like and discuss the damage done in an abusive cult, and look briefly at what aids recovery.

The positive aspects of Spirituality

Spirituality as defined in *'Spirituality and Psychiatry'* is the opposite of pathological dysfunction and disease (p.254). Chris Cook states:

'Spirituality is a distinctive, potentially creative and universal dimension of human experience arising both within the inner subjective awareness of individuals and within communities, social groups and traditions. It may be experienced as relationship with that which is intimately 'inner', immanent and personal, within the self and others, and/or as relationship with that which is wholly 'other', transcendent and beyond the self. It is experienced as being of fundamental or ultimate importance and is thus concerned with matters of meaning and purpose in life, truth and values.'
(p.4).

So what can go wrong?

Spirituality can be envisaged on a continuum from healthy to pathological and harmful (even to the point of murder or death as in Jonestown Guyana and Waco, Texas) (p.254 & p.255). At the far end of this continuum is spiritual abuse and cults. Whilst the term 'cult' is contentious, it is a useful term in that it is recognised by the general population (mainly thanks to the media) and I tend to use it to describe a group or one-on-one relationship that has particular criteria - and is usually abusive and harmful (see p.257 for further discussion).

The criteria for a cult are:

'A cult is a group or movement that, to a significant degree, (a) exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, (b) uses a thought-reform program to persuade, control, and socialise members (i.e. to integrate them into the group's unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values, and practices), (c) systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members, (d) exploit members to advance the leadership's goals, and (e) causes psychological harm to members, their families and the community.' (Langone, p.5)

One might say that some cults are evil.

What is evil?

Social Psychologist Zimbardo (2007) discusses the nature of evil, in many different settings, including genocide and war. He is known for his controversial 'Stamford Prison Experiment'. He defines evil thus:

'Evil consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanise, or destroy innocent others – or using one's authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf. It is knowing better but doing worse.' (p.5)

This is applicable to some abusive cults and leads to harm.

The harm done:

What does a former cult member look like?

The story of Saskia – a compilation case study (identifying details have been changed to ensure confidentiality)

Saskia is 34 years old. She joined a lively spiritual community when she was at University, aged 23. She stopped all her studies, cut off contact with her family and friends and dedicated her life to the group. They changed her name (from Sarah) and she lost her identity and sense of self.

Membership was exciting to start with but over time she discovered that all was not well in the community and it was not what it appeared to be from the outside. She felt trapped and dependent but could not leave because she had cut off all contact with her family and friends, so she kept telling herself that things were okay.

In spite of the strong phobia they had installed in her, namely that if she left she would be punished by 'God' or she would die, she gained the strength to finally leave when her mother wrote to her on her 30th Birthday. She was depressed, confused and felt guilty leaving the leader and other group members behind but she also felt guilt towards her family and friends for abandoning them and hurting them.

She did not know what to make of her experience and so even if she had wanted to explain it she could not – and her experience so far showed that people seemed to judge her and

blame her and not understand how deceived, controlled and abused she had been. The counsellor she went to see did not understand about cults and wanted to talk about her relationship with her family and her father in particular.

Post cult psychopathology

As we see illustrated by Saskia/Sarah, many former members feel fearful that the (often terrifying) beliefs of the cult are true, for example 'hell'. They may believe there will be serious spiritual consequences to leaving, such as they will go to 'hell' or die. Some fear reprisals from the group. This fear needs to be taken seriously and the former members' safety established (p.262).

Former members may feel guilt and shame and their emotional states may fluctuate. The effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may show themselves in anxiety, panic attacks, nightmares and dissociation. Former members may suffer from cognitive difficulties and lack of concentration, especially if they have been in a group that was highly abusive and/or excessively meditates chants or speaks in tongues.

There may be general adjustment difficulties for the former member. Because dependency and conformity is a part of membership of some cults, the former member may struggle to return to their pre-cult level of autonomy and decision making (p.267-8).

What can be done about it?

Specialist counselling with former members needs to focus on:

- cult related issues before childhood issues
- discerning between cult induced psychopathology and inherent mental illness
- paying attention to what the group taught and its belief systems
- education aimed at empowering the former member to **understand** their cult experience
- undoing indoctrinated teachings, beliefs and practices that compromise autonomy
- attending to PTSD
- addressing cult induced phobias which may result from pathological spiritual beliefs
- reconnecting with their real self and getting rid of cult pseudo-personality (Jenkinson, 2008)
- understanding and integrating the experience and moving on
- acknowledging the particular needs of those born and/or raised in a cultic group (second generation adults or SGAs) as they may need help adjusting to the alien culture society presents to them outside the cult (p.269/270)

Conclusion

Many people are attracted to a wide range of spiritual approaches and are exploring new ideas. Some will fall victim to false gurus and pathological spirituality (p.270). It is vital that mental health professionals understand the dynamics within these cultic groups and also the

impact of pathological spirituality on the mindset of individuals who have been affected in order to help them recover.

Resources

Internet

It can be helpful to suggest carefully sourced resources, of which there are many. As in any situation, all internet sites should be approached with a critical mind.

In UK: INFORM gives information about New Religious Movements and some cultic groups; www.infom.ac: as does the Cult Information Centre: www.cultinformation.org.uk. These organisations take different views of the cult problem.

International but based in USA: The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA): www.icsahome.com. Members are from all around the world. ICSA publishes the peer reviewed 'International Journal of Cultic Studies' and 'ICSA Today Magazine'. The site contains a great deal of information and research into the cultic studies field, much of which is conducted by respected academics and is empirically tested. The site represents different points of view regarding the cult problem. The annual conference is also advertised on the site.

Books

Lalich, J. Tobias. M. 2006. *Take Back your Life: Recovery from Cults and Abusive Relationships* Bay Tree Publishing: California – many former members find this book helpful both in terms of content and format. There are chapters for former members, therapists and pastoral counsellors amongst others.

ICSA published an e-book '*Starting out in America*' designed for former members leaving a group - some of this information is transferable to former members in the UK.

References and Bibliography

Crowley, N. and Jenkinson, G. (2009) Pathological Spirituality in Cook, C. Powell, A. and Sims, A. (Eds). *Spirituality and Psychiatry*. RCPsych Publications. London

Jenkinson, G (2008) An investigation into cult pseudo-personality: what is it and how does it form? *Cultic Studies Review*. Vol. 7 (3) pp.199-224 (www.icsahome.com)

Langone, M L (Ed) (1993) *Recovery from Cults* WW Norton & Company. London