

Perspectives



Is Spirituality Good for You?

AN IRONY OF THE PRESENT POPULAR INTEREST IN RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IS the way in which it sometimes seeks—or is given—the imprimatur of the scientific worldview that it so often eschews. Inevitably our culture will require that some relative of the FDA guarantee it that this or that religious exercise will not prove harmful to its health.

Thus, the spate of recent books and conferences on the prudential value of religion. Truth is not the primary question here, simply value received. Certainly an argument that religion is good for you is more welcome than the opposite claim, which so long dominated parts of the health community. Harold Koenig (of Duke University Medical Center) provides an amazing collection of statements denouncing religion by mental health professionals—from Freud’s observation that religion is “the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity” to Wendell Watters’s confident assertion, as late as 1992, that Christian teachings are “incompatible with the development and maintenance of sound health.”¹ Koenig proceeds to examine the data, employing the best of scientific method, to argue that “the mature use of religion *causes* better health.”² He is in good company. Everyone from Harvard Medical School to your own local clinic is fascinated now (quite legitimately so) with the healing value of spiritual exercise.

Harvard professor Herbert Benson assures us that religion is good not only for emotional disorders but for physical ones as well:

But we now know from the data we’ve seen in previous chapters that faith moves in us, but not in necessarily mysterious ways. We are beginning to be able to explain the way that physiologic mechanisms transmit and materialize faith to produce healing. This leaves us to ponder the truly remarkable fact that our brains/bodies are so equipped. And rather than thinking that science debunks miracles, I choose to believe that science underscores the awesome, and perhaps even miraculous, design of the human body.³

Benson believes this miraculous design derives from God, though his god of health has no particular definition:

I describe “God” with a capital “G” in this book but nevertheless hope readers will understand that I am referring to all the deities of the Judeo-Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu traditions, to gods and goddesses, as well as to

¹Cited by Harold G. Koenig in *Is Religion Good for Your Health? The Effects of Religion on Physical and Mental Health* (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1997) 23, 27.

²*Ibid.*, 119.

³Herbert Benson, with Marg Stark, *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief* (New York: Scribner, 1996) 206.

all the spirits worshipped and beloved by humans all over the world and throughout history. In my scientific observations, I have learned that no matter what name you give the Infinite Absolute you worship, no matter what theology you ascribe to, the results of believing in God are the same.⁴

Now, alas, it is Christian theologians who begin to get a little edgy. Can we embrace Benson's assertion that faith of whatever kind is healthy, or have we too often seen evidence of Watters's claim that at least some forms of religious teaching are deadly? Certainly it matters to one's physical health whether the chalice on the altar contains Cabernet or cyanide. Certainly some forms of self-help spirituality may turn simply self-ish, and prove remarkably unhealthy to the families and communities of those who partake.⁵ And Jürgen Moltmann reminds us, even as he affirms the truth and wonder of Christian charismatic gifts, that some kinds of religious orientation might be dangerous to the earth itself:

Where are the charismatics in the everyday world, in politics, in the peace movement or the environmental movement? Why did they not join our demonstrations against nuclear weapons? If the powers of the divine Spirit are not given that we might escape the conflicts of this real world into a dream world of religion, but rather that we might bear witness to the liberating rule of Christ in the midst of these conflicts, then the "charismatic movement" dare never become a private and nonpolitical religion. Discipleship—following Jesus—is and remains the criterion for life in the Holy Spirit.⁶

Moreover, biblical Christianity keeps being interested not only in the question of meaning but of truth. Not that we should ever want to drive a final wedge between the two. If faith heals, those who believe in a Creator God will be interested in how that works; they will pause in wonder, with Benson, at the science of it, and, with the faithful throughout the ages, at the mystery of it. But they will also recognize the presence of more malevolent spirits—from the terrifying and destructive forces that African villagers call witches to the narcissistic and greedy forces that we recognize in some entrepreneurial forms of contemporary spirituality.

Despite Benson's assurance, not all spirituality is benign. Despite Freud's warning, not all religion is obsessional. Christian pastors and theologians will continue to bear the responsibility of helping believers and parishioners discern the spirits that either haunt or enliven the various spiritualities now making their claims upon people. They will continue to engage in a public discussion that is willing to find a place for the legitimate claims of the healing power of religion and spirituality while also asserting the ultimate healing to be found in the one Spirit—God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the source of breath and life for all the world.

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⁴Ibid., 200.

⁵See Alan Tjeltveit, "Psychotherapeutic Triumphalism and Freedom from Mental Illness: Diverse Concepts of Mental Health," *Word & World* 9/2 (1989) 132-139.

⁶Jürgen Moltmann, *Die Quelle des Lebens: Der Heilige Geist und die Theologie des Lebens* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1977) 66 (my translation).