

“SPIRITUALITY”: “WEASEL-WORD” OR GATEWAY TO NEW UNDERSTANDINGS?

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VISITING THE SAMUEL PALMER Exhibition at the British Museum, I was struck, not only by the spiritual power of the paintings, especially in the late Shoreham period such as, my favorite: *The Magic Apple Tree* (circa 1830)—but how Palmer appeared to bring both Christian and Pantheistic themes into his work. The museum’s exhibition collator remarks that Palmer saw the fruitfulness of the earth as an intimation of Divine creativity. The artist sought to capture “The essential vivifying spirit, vital spark” (Palmer’s words) of the physical world in which we live.

I was reminded as I moved from *The Magic Apple Tree*, to *In a Shoreham Garden*, and *The Golden Valley*, how these paintings had been used by a record company when they had issued all of Ralph Vaughan Williams’ orchestral and choral works in the 1970s, to mark his anniversary. Vaughan Williams was not a signed up Christian, but many of his choral works express a strong yearning for the transcendent using Christian imagery. The day before I visited the Palmer exhibition, I listened to Professor Robert Winston on *Start the Week* (28th November, 2005), in which he spoke of his BBC series *The Story of God* (Win-

ston, 2005). As a scientist, Winston is intrigued as to why humans seek the transcendent. He continually refers to this desired other as “God,” although I think it would be more accurate to call it a search for the transcendent. Winston puzzles over why there appears to be “a God-shaped hole” within humanity (*Start the Week*, November, 28, 2005), and again, as a scientist, postulates that: “the more we understand about science, the less we understand about the Universe.”

In the light of the most popular films and books at present, the search for something beyond ourselves appears to be very much at the center, rather than at the periphery of humanity’s consciousness at the present time. Reading Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy, and reading his various essays, we are struck by his articulation of the human search:

We need a story, a myth that does what the traditional religious stories did. It must *explain*. It must satisfy our hunger for a *Why* . . . There are two kinds of *Why*, and our story must deal with both. There’s the one that asks *What brought us here?* and the other that asks *What are we here for?* (Pullman, 2001)

The author’s article is very helpful in its practical approach to psychotherapy and spirituality. I particularly liked her reference to the work of Charles Corr (1991) and his work with people

who are dying and considering the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of the last days. The *spiritual* aspects being around identifying, developing, or reaffirming spiritual sources of energy and hope. This is the kind of approach that the National Institute for Mental Health in England (NIMHE) national Project on Spirituality and Mental Health has been engaged in since 2001, the approach being to stress the spiritual dimension as an integral part of a whole person and whole systems approach to mental health; work with mental health services and their partners to engage with this agenda; and work toward a better understanding between faith communities and mental health services (see Gilbert and Nicholls, 2003). Service users and their carers are increasingly stating strongly to services that they wish to have their spiritual dimension and spiritual needs addressed properly—and certainly not in a “tick-box” method! The author quotes Samson and Zarter (2003) as saying that the person’s spiritual dimension “draws a thread of identity, relationship, meaning and purpose, which weave through each of these aspects” (i.e. the life events and other aspects of their being).

I welcome the author’s stress on a “relational approach,” and her breadth of reference, for example, the diary of Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and philosopher, but I had some concerns about her use of the term *personal theology*, and talk of the personal aspect of religion and “the Divine,” in that I think that this could narrow the discussion down to a religious experience (rather than the broader spiritual one), which may be alien to many. Although surveys seem to indicate a belief in God, or gods, among around 70% of the UK population, that still leaves 30% who might well talk about a spiritual dimension of their lives, and even a search for the transcendent, without a concept of “the Divine.” The former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, has used the term “weasel-word” to describe spirituality, and some writers are suspicious of it in that, in some senses, it is a relatively modern concept, but I see the term “Spirituality” as a “gateway word,” because it enables us to talk about a range of experiences that are not necessarily linked to a personal deity. Interestingly, the Bishop of Staf-

ford, Gordon Mursell (2001) uses the “S” word, and the Hindu sage on Professor Winston’s first episode (BBC1, December 4, 2005) also used “Spirituality” extensively. When speaking about the project, I have to be careful to both separate and conjoin issues around spirituality and religion, because people quite often challenge me by suggesting that when I speak about “Spirituality,” I really mean “religion.” I recently wrote an article about the interlinking between spirituality, mental health, and running (Gilbert 2005a).

The author has many wise words to say about how we respond to people in a spiritual crisis, linked to a mental and/or physical crisis, and her stress on relationships is essential. Ken Jarrold (2005), in his recent speech to the Institute of Health Management, drew attention to the concerns that many have, that the NHS today is becoming devoid of the personal and human approach, while prating vacuously about “patient-centered services”! In the BBC1 *Panorama* program on December 4, 2005, following up various stories during the year, one featured was on the undercover nurse at the Sussex County Hospital, Brighton, where frail, elderly people were left to molder, uncared for, in a general hospital in one of the most prosperous areas of England. As we become more technically proficient, more rational, and more mechanistic, we are in grave danger of ratcheting up a mechanical performance at the expense of humanity (Gilbert 2005b). The NIMHE Project on Spirituality, allied to other work around values (where Professor Bill Fulford is the NIMHE Fellow), recovery, social inclusion, whole life, and so on, strives to promote an holistic approach to care that those who use services say they desire. Human beings, as Professor Winston points out, search for meaningful relationships. Whether this is simply our genetic struggle for survival, or something more profound we may not know for sure, but search we do!

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