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Science and spirituality

A crossing point in holistic health

Sveinn Guðmundsson

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In the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, nurses, doctors and various scientists in Western societies are becoming interested in alternative ways to look at health and the individual. These views are not all new in the history of the world but new to Western science tradition. They include health therapies and religious or spiritual practices from societies in different times and places that were revived by the New Age Movement (NAM). Today they are usually referred to as complimentary and alternative medicine (CAM) or holistic medicine.

The intent of this article is to take a closer look at the shift that opened the door to these "new" views on health in order to establish a ground to situate health professionals in Iceland who share this interest. The text begins with a discussion of science and modernity that leads to a change of emphasis on the individuals life from being lived by external expectations to a more internal and self directed living. This shift is then connected to changing views within a part of the Western health professional community. Finally a short discussion about the situation in Iceland regarding these matters and the authors ongoing research among health professionals in Iceland with special interest in CAM, holistic health ideas and spirituality. The research is a part of the authors PhD thesis in anthropology on science and spirituality and its crossing point in ideas about holistic health.

Science and the Modern World

The dominant view of modern Western science has its roots in empirism which is believed to come from Aristotle. The empirical standpoint assumes that material things stay the same and can be observed, measured, accounted for and turned into knowledge. Positivism, built on empirism and lead by Auguste Comte, played a big part in replacing older theories that emphasized the search for ultimate causes and meaning with stress on observation and description. Comte believed that positive philosophy with its scientific examination of society would make it whole and put an end to mystical views of history and nature. To leave speculative thought and turn to the positive stage became a sign of historical development, social reform and progress. With observation, facts became knowledge and only things that could be observed deserved investigation. Physical science then became a model for other disciplines to shape its research methods and the scientific method became the main tool to view the world and to understand it in Western societies. Max Weber pointed out that with increased emphasis on rationality and bureaucracy the control over people grows as well. To Weber rationalization can have cage-like qualities that affects the way people think and act (Morrison, 1998).

The anthropologist Raymond L.M. Lee (2008) inspired by Weber adds that in an age of science and rationalization, disenchantment takes place and belief in the gods starts to

decline. When that happens death becomes a taboo. To Lee the reason why death is so alarming in contemporary societies is that modernity has limited the ways individuals have to contain their fear of death. There are fewer possibilities to relieve the fear in a ritual or existential and meaningful way. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990) discusses modernity, trust in abstract systems, knowledge, globalization and the effect it has on people, everyday life and their fear of things they can't control. The world might end at any time and there is nothing the individual can do about it. This fear that Giddens names the "juggernaut" calls for adaptive reactions in people. One of them is *sustained optimism*, which in the spirit of the Enlightenment is based on the hope that we will find the technology or cure needed in the near future. The faith in science is a good example. The belief that rational thought and science will save the day offers a feeling of security. But professional knowledge can be inconsistent and different researches can have different results and that can confuse the individual. The fact is that we cannot feel secure in a world where the danger of nuclear winter and ecological disasters looms over our heads all the time. Giddens argues that we are all riding the juggernaut whether we like it or not. He mentions what he calls *the transformation of intimacy* in relation to the connection between globalization tendencies of modernity and the every day life where the individual is trying to find his identity within the system he lives in. In a world full of dangers where things can seem to be out of the individuals control a concern for self-fulfillment is a defense mechanism and a positive appropriation. According to Giddens this drives the person to "open" the self "out", trust others and establish personal ties in an attempt of self-actualization.

The discussion above shows that in a complex modern society science and rationalization has taken over religion without answering all the questions or solving all the problems. The individuals is left feeling powerless in a terrifying world. Since there is no way for the individual to change the world around him he turns the focus on himself.

The Shift

Desmond Ryan (2002), a sociologist connects the increased emphasis on personhood in today's Western society to a transition from modernity to post-modernity. In the last 50 years most individuals experience a growing detachment from established structures like family, religion, authority and class solidarity. In other words, the grand narratives are losing their power. The result of this shift is that the individual self is becoming more sovereign and the traditional structures of society are declining.

Sociologists Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead et al. (2005) agree with Ryan that self-understanding and socio-cultural arrangements have been turning towards a "person or subjectivity" centered direction. The examples they give are that in health culture the turn is towards being "patient centered", in educational culture it is "child centered" and in purchasing culture it is "consumer-centered". These transitions are signs of a turn away from a more hierarchical order of things where the doctor, the teacher or the manager was a godlike authority. Heelas, Woodhead et al. talk about a major cultural shift away from life lived by external expectations or objective roles, and a turn to one's own subjective, inner experience. In short the subjective turn is thus a turn away from "life-as" to "subjective-life". Life-as means that higher authorities that stand above and over the individual self direct one's life, give it value and meaning. This turn from life-as is then a turn towards subjective-life to become what the individual wants, not the authority. The goal is to become your own source of meaning, significance and authority and to forge

one's own inner-directed paths instead of following established one's. Between the two modes there is a deep incompatibility and in a way they interfere with each other. Personal feelings disrupt one's duty or a supposed way to be living and conversely external institutions can threaten the individual's values and existence. Heelas, Woodhead et al. are not suggesting that there has been a clear-cut shift from life-as to subjective life. However they state that the subjective turn has become the defining cultural development of modern western culture.

Ryan (2002) points out that the public appears to be resisting the dominance of Western science in their private worlds and the polar opposites religion and science are now side by side being criticized for their obsession with competing truth claims, over-emphasis on the intellect and lack of interest in the experiential dimensions of being human. To Ryan the increased interest in complementary health service shows the widespread influence of the NAM spirit. Westerners today are tired of thinking or believing, they want to experience.

Lee (2008) describes how we have developed from a "death-denying society" to one where ideas from NAM, parapsychology and near-death experiences are spreading out. These alternative ideas where death is seen as a gateway or liberation have started to take the place of ideas about death as a last stop or a point of extinction. In this way death is a process of personal liberation since there is in fact no real death, only the continuity of consciousness. According to New Age ideas death is only a doorway and in that sense offers hope instead of anxiety. To Lee modernity and rational calculation failed to bring an end to suffering and in the revolt against modernity new (and old) ideas brought re-enchantment into modernity.

Heelas (1996) mentions that a number of uncertainties of modernity result in identity-problems which direct people to try something new in their search for solutions. The New Age offers an alternative way of life to what the capitalist mainstream offers. This way of life includes being concerned about the state of the planet and all its inhabitants. The New Age way to save the planet is to start with the individual. This brings up *radical engagement*, another one of Giddens (1990) adaptive reactions to the dangers facing the modern world. It includes the fact that although we are facing major problems we should do what we can to reduce or counter them. Heelas (1996) also mentions Weber's idea of modernity as an iron cage as a reason why people seek a lifestyle inspired by NAM in an attempt to escape the routines of bureaucracy and life lived by rules and regulations. Instead people see the New Age lifestyle as a way to help them take more control over their own lives. Anthropologists Ruth Prince and David Riches (1999) explain NAM individualism in connection to its holistic ideology. An important part of NAM ideology is the individual experience of personal transformation, a kind of self-spirituality where the goal is to liberate a greater power that lies within the individual. NAM's doctrinal tolerance allows individuals to draw inspiration from various philosophical or spiritual sources. In other words, NAM individualism embraces different values. At the same time all the different ideas build up to a holistic view of the human being where the physical, the mental, the emotional and the spiritual are one.

According to Ryan (2002) the intent of NAM and CAM is to counter the disorientation and fragmentation left by modern societies fundamental political, economic, technological and social state. The different world-views of these movements are a revolt against the dominant analytical mind-set of Western science. It is also an attempt to supply the isolated individual self an integrative structure or discipline for example in the form of meditation and considering the self to be spiritual. Heelas (1996) underlines that people react differently to what might be described as "problems of modernity" and some

are attracted to the New Age lifestyle with its significantly different ideology than that of mainstream modernity. Individuals who consider conventional ideas and remedies having failed and are searching for new answers may find fresh approach in the New Age phenomena.

A shift has and is taking place in Western societies. Individuals want personal autonomy and are tired of being told how to live their life. The time of authoritative institutions is declining and people are looking for new sources for inspiration that fit their own personal views. Ideas from different sources taken up by NAM provide new answers, new ways to see the world and give people hope. Health is in the individual's hands and death is maybe not such a dead end as it used to be. At the same time NAM encourages people to take control of their lives and rediscover themselves by drawing inspiration from old and new ideas from various directions.

At this point in history we have seen both extremes, religion and science and now people are starting to look for new ideas to view the world outside of the scientific worldview that has dominated Western society or in conjunction with it.

Health Professionals

Although the scientific community has clear rules and methods on how to produce knowledge, scientists from diverse fields and backgrounds are considering holistic health, CAM and the effect of spirituality or religious involvement on health. Sociologists David R. Williams and Michelle J. Sternthal (2007) gathered findings from studies in medicine, psychiatry, psychology and other fields, which show a positive association between spirituality or religious involvement, and physical and mental health (also see Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Koenig, 2007; Park, 2007). Lorraine M. Wright, nurse (2005) emphasizes the importance of including spirituality in the caring process of a patient. (Also see Winterling et al. 2006). In Wright's book *Spirituality, Suffering, and Illness: Ideas for Healing* (Wright, 2005) she offers a model to encourage and enable nurses and other health-care providers to bring forth conversations with their patients and their families about spirituality, beliefs and suffering. The aim of Wright's book is to give people understanding of these matters within an illness context. She is convinced that the most significant influence on how people cope with illness is what they believe about it. The effect of people's religious and spiritual beliefs on how they experience illness is according to Wright one of the most ignored aspects in health care. Wright defines spirituality as "whatever or whoever gives ultimate meaning and purpose in one's life that invites particular ways of being in the world in relation to others, oneself, and the universe" (Wright, 2005, p. 4). According to her nurses in Western societies are starting to pay attention to this new field and writing books and articles on the subject (see for example Newman, 1994; O'Brien, 2008).

Nurses have also a great interest in holistic approaches to health and the American Holistic Nurses Association (2010) is one example. A vast literature is available on the subject where terms like health; holistic health and holistic nursing are defined in different ways. Everything from the association's definition of holistic nursing as "all nursing practice that has healing the whole person as its goal" (American Holistic Nurses Association, 2010 1. paragraph) to nurse Margaret A. Newman's (1994) view of health as expanding consciousness. Doctors are turning to holistic approaches to health as well and the American Holistic Medical Association was founded in order to unite licensed physicians who practice holistic medicine (American Holistic Medical Association, 2010a).

The association defines “holistic medicine” as “the art and science of healing that addresses care of the whole person - body, mind, and spirit. The practice of holistic medicine integrates conventional and complementary therapies to promote optimal health, and prevent and treat disease by addressing contributing factors” (American Holistic Medical Association, 2010b: 1 paragraph). According to the association disease is the result of physical, emotional, spiritual, social and environmental imbalance. These aspects need to be brought into balance for healing to take place. Various methods are used but the focus is on the patient as a unique individual who must do the work, change his old habits, beliefs and lifestyle (American Holistic Medical Association, 2010b).

Larry Dossey, a medical doctor (1999, 2006), has written about the positive benefits of prayer on health (also see Jantos & Kiat 2007) and states that spiritual meaning can help fill the inner void that accompanies modern life. Dossey (1999) has also written about consciousness and the unbounded ways it works in space and time, which he names *nonlocal mind*. He divides medicine into 3 eras: Era I began in the 1860s and can be described as materialistic or mechanistic. It includes therapies like drugs, radiation and surgery that govern Western medicine today. Era I focuses on effects of things in the body. Era II started after World War II and is a description of medicine today. It is defined by the idea that the mind can affect the body, which came largely from research on the placebo effect and the beneficial results of positive thinking, suggestion and expectations. These mind-body approaches of era II are starting to be used today with Era I medicine for example when heart disease medications and stress management is used together. Another example is when cancer chemotherapy and surgery is used along with psychological counseling. In short, what Era II added was the effect of the mind within the individual. Era III, which is the future according to Dossey, introduces nonlocal medicine where the idea is that the mind also works outside of the brain and body of the individual. To Dossey nonlocal mind explains intuitive feelings or premonitions and if the mind can roam outside the body that means that consciousness lives on after the body has died. Therefore the fear of death, the disease that has caused mankind the most suffering of all is cured. He also adds that people need a positive sense of meaning, purpose, and spiritual fulfillment in their lives for without it life withers.

What these few examples from scholars and health professionals demonstrate is that scientists in Western societies are starting to look beyond the realms of modern empiric view of the world. Spirituality, expanding consciousness, mind-body relations and various holistic ideas are now a part of many nurses and doctors views on health. Although this “surge” or “movement” may still be a minority in the Western health profession community it symbolizes the shift in thought that is taking place.

Iceland

The authors PhD thesis is a research among health professionals in Iceland with special interest in CAM, holistic health ideas and spirituality. The qualitative part of the research involves doing interviews with health professionals and participant observations on conferences or other events where health professionals and CAM practitioners meet and discuss health from various point of views. A special emphasis is on nurses. The movement or surge mentioned above within the Western health professional community serves to position the participants in the study in a greater context.

Preliminary results from the ongoing qualitative study show that influence from CAM and NAM ideology is spreading through the nursing community in Iceland. The

participants in the interviews are all practicing nurses who have education in various CAM therapies like NLP, massage techniques such as Cranio-Sacral Therapy, Bowen Technique and Shiatsu, healing practices and more. Some of them are using their knowledge of the therapies in their nursing profession in direct or indirect ways and others work as CAM practitioners in their spare time. The qualitative research also includes participant observation on various conferences where health professionals and CAM practitioners meet and discuss health from different point of views. To the researcher these gatherings are an attempt to break down walls between the official health care system and the CAM system. This dialog that is being established between a group of health professionals and CAM practitioners is a sign of a crossing point in ideologies that have been separate for a long time. Among the topics discussed by health professionals on these conferences are what can be done to increase cooperation between the official health care system and CAM practitioners in Iceland, the importance of looking at health from a holistic perspective, the power of the mind, the power of prayer and meditation, balanced lifestyle, prescription drugs and the placebo effect, the pharmaceutical industry and more.

In their article *Notkun óhefðbundinnar heilbrigðisþjónustu á Íslandi*, sociologists Björg Helgadóttir, Rúnar Vilhjálmsson and nurse Þóra Jenný Gunnarsdóttir (2010) discuss results from their study on how many Icelanders are using CAM therapies and why they do so. The data was gathered in 2006 and the results showed that 31,8% of the participants did so in the last 12 months and that there is a growing interest among the Icelandic public in CAM therapies. The basic ideas behind the therapies concerning a holistic view of the individual and the connection between mind, body and spirit appears to appeal to Icelanders according to the researchers. They also say that nurses have for a long time had a positive attitude to CAM in their work because the holistic vision of these therapies fits well to the ideology in nursing. Nurses have started using scientifically tested forms of complimentary therapies in health institutions in Iceland when “conventional” resources to alleviate symptoms like anxiety, pain and insomnia fail.

In a report on the use of complimentary therapies used in the National University Hospital of Iceland nurses Agnes Smáradóttir, Lilja Jónasdóttir, Nanna Friðriksdóttir and Þóra Jenný Gunnarsdóttir (2008) mention the positive result of various forms of massage, relaxation and walking exercises. The nurses suggests that the use of other complimentary therapies should be taken into consideration and mention the possibility of cooperation with qualified CAM practitioners. Finally they emphasize that more research needs to be done on complimentary therapies in Iceland.

Courses on complimentary and alternative therapies in nursing have been taught by nurses for nurses in university programs on a graduate level in Reykjavík and Akureyri. The courses focus on introducing complimentary therapies like massage, relaxation, music therapy, hypnotism and aroma therapy and how they can be used in practice. The students do hands-on exercises in relaxation and massage therapies and do group projects on how to introduce complimentary therapies in their clinical environment (Þóra Jenný Gunnarsdóttir, 2008a, 2008b).

For the last decade CAM and holistic therapies have had an increased discussion in the nurse literature in Iceland (see for example Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir & Ólöf Kristjánsdóttir, 2003; Herdís Jónasdóttir, 2005; Ingibjörg J. Friðbertsdóttir, 2008) and preparation is being made to establish a subsection within the Icelandic Nursing Association on complimentary therapies in nursing (The Icelandic Nursing Association, 2010). Icelanders use of CAM is growing and the ideas behind them seem to attract the publics interest. Nurses appear to be open to some of these therapies and are starting to apply them in their work in different ways. This is a sign of the Icelandic health care system, or at least a part of it,

taking a positive approach to CAM and holistic ideas and showing an interest in some kind of cooperation or acceptance.

Conclusions

Complimentary and alternative therapies, holistic ideas of health and spirituality revived by the New Age Movement are making its way in Western societies. In an age of science these alternative views on health and the human being help the individual to escape the iron cage of rationality and take control of his own life. The search for self-fulfillment has begun and holistic ideas about the connection between mind, body and spirit fit well with that quest. The unexplored power of the mind and consciousness give hope and new answers to old question. The scientific method is no longer considered by all the only way to gain knowledge and scientists are opening up to these possibilities, starting to research, theorize and even practice them. In Iceland health professionals are catching on and nurses are taking up CAM therapies and holistic ideas and trying to find a place for it in their practice.

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