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CHAPTER ?

MATERIAL SPIRITUALITY: CHALLENGING GNOSTIC TENDENCIES IN CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDINGS OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIAL WORK

Russell Whiting

Introduction

The basic premise underlying this chapter is that the material is spiritual. What is resisted is the presupposition, labelled as Gnostic here, that the spiritual realm and the material world are somehow separate and distinct from each other. This latter notion, it will be argued, is an often accepted although possibly not thought through assumption in much contemporary discussion of religion and spirituality in social work and it leads to workers treating issues of religion and spirituality as somehow different and separate from their day to day practical work. This presupposition will be challenged

by a focus on the meaning of ‘the body’ in spiritual terms in social work practice.

As an example of how the discussion might be framed I recall an occasion working when working as an admissions tutor at a UK university which was offering qualifying social work education. At a recruitment event a prospective student asked me ‘Do you need to be a vegetarian to be social work student?’ At the time I laughed off this question and thought it said something superficial about the image of social workers in the UK. But actually it can potentially be seen as a starting point for a deeper discussion on the social worker’s engagement with and attitudes towards the wider world and spirituality. How an individual should view the world and the place of their own body within it and hence what they should consume, are actually the central topics of Gnostic thinking. This question can therefore be used to contextualise a discussion on Gnosticism and religion and spirituality in social work and it will be returned to later in the chapter.

The first section of this chapter will consider briefly how Gnosticism has been defined, its history and development; it will outline my own personal faith position in relation to these beliefs and draw on the work of Berry (1997) to consider the implications of Gnosticism in contemporary society. The chapter does not hold a position favouring religion or spirituality, and

Gnosticism is shown as potentially damaging, in different ways, to both. The next section which will look briefly at the recent good work which has been done on the body and embodiment in social work (Cameron and McDermott 2007; Ferguson 2011; Price and Walker 2015), notes that Walsh (2009) has begun the work of connecting up these ideas to the thinking on spirituality but that this has not yet been taken further. What the implications for social work practice of an unthinking Gnostic or dualistic view of the body and the spirit are considered via a discussion of *anorexia nervosa*, sometimes called The Gnostic Syndrome. Looking for positive interpretations of the body in social work the chapter examines the potential of mindfulness (Lee et al 2009) in this regard. Lastly the ideas of phenomenological writers such as Heidegger (1962) and Levin (1985) will also be offered as a helpful way forward.

Definitions, Doctrines and a Brief History of Gnosticism

Gray (2015) has claimed that Gnosticism is the predominant set of beliefs of most educated people in modern society, particularly in the West. By Gnosticism he means the primacy of knowledge (science) and faith in the human capacity for advancement through such science. Gray has little time

for such an exalted view of the human and the self. Voegelin (1975) describes the entire renaissance and humanist/enlightenment project through to the Marxist totalitarian state as the Gnostic Age because he argues it is a period which sees elevation of the human to the divine. It may be helpful however, before engaging with contemporary speculations about the usefulness and relevance of the term Gnostic to begin with a more detailed account of the origins and doctrines of historical Gnosticism.

Gnosticism emerged contemporaneously with Early Christianity. There is much debate amongst scholars (George 1995) about whether it should be seen as a separate religion or as an off-shoot of or heresy within Christianity. Certainly there were Gnostic movements which were wholly separate from Christianity; the religion founded by Mani in Iran which went on to be known as Zoroastrianism is the most notable. However, it is not necessary to get into a technical discussion on precedence and primacy. The essential doctrines of Gnosticism, whether it operated within or without Christian groupings are broadly similar. The Christian theologian Leech (1981) describes Gnosticism as having three main traits; firstly a stress on secret knowledge or *gnosis*; second 'the division of the world into ... the *illuminati*, those who are "in the know" and the rest of mankind, the common herd; thirdly, the location of evil in *matter*' (Leech 1981: 32). This chapter will focus predominantly on the last trait but the other two will also

be briefly discussed. The secret knowledge of historical Gnosticism was not science in general but can be summed up in the phrase ‘I am God’ or ‘the divine within’. Houtman and Aupers in their account of contemporary New Age spirituality in social work write:

This, then, is the principal doctrine of New Age spirituality: the belief that in the deepest layers of the self “the divine spark” — to borrow a term from ancient Gnosticism — is still smouldering, waiting to be stirred up and supersede the socialised self.

(Houtman and Aupers 2010: 211)

The key point is that the Gnostic looks inward, to the inner life, for their explanations and meaning. They do not look outward to the world because they believe that the world, all matter in fact, to be bad or evil. This is what is meant by the description of Gnosticism as a dualistic religion (Runciman 1947). It keeps the spirit pure by separating it entirely from the material world. Any concept of the divine cannot be of a creator god because creation is clearly impure. Therefore Gnostics often have complex explanations for the creation of the world as made by a demigod, angels, demons or the devil. The divine must be wholly separate from impure creation although through such secret knowledge initiates could in

themselves become divine. This is how they at least begin to address the perennial problem of the existence of evil.

Official church histories portray a narrative of Gnosticism being one of the principal Christian heresies which was overcome by the Early Fathers at the councils of the Church. Gnosticism was known to have persisted, dwindling in popularity although continuing in pockets in heretical churches such as the Paulicans, the Bogomils in Bosnia and the Cathars in southern France (Runciman 1947) who were finally defeated and massacred in the 1200s. In actual fact a strong argument can be made that the ideas of Gnosticism survived and were incorporated within Christianity itself:

Although the orthodox teaching held that the material world is good, mainstream Christian history offers many examples of teaching and practices that seem rather “world hating”, the charge the orthodox levelled against the Gnostics.

(George 1995: 25)

One of the central doctrines of the Church, original sin, has strong Gnostic overtones. St. Augustine, the first and principal propagator of the doctrine had originally been a Manichean. Chittester, a Christian feminist theologian

has argued that theological dualism, the fear of the body and the patriarchal power structures of the church are closely inter-related:

Bodies, with their drives and needs, their impulses and urges, warranted basic distrust by virtue of their threat or right reasoning, if nothing else. And women, most of all, the blatantly natural, and totally carnal, the most bodily of bodies, epitomised the hazard and jeopardised the rationality, of the male soul.

(Chittester 1998: 23)

Certainly dualist, anti-materialist, patriarchal tendencies have remained a significant feature of the Christian religion to up the present day but there is a risk that such dualism is so deep-rooted that alternative spiritualities, such as New Age thinking and the 'spiritual but not religious' discourses are likewise at risk of polarising the body and the spirit. Leech adds:

The rejection of art and beauty, of human passion and amusement derives from a more fundamental rejection of, and mistrust of, the body. It is this which is fundamental to Gnosticism in every age, including our own.

(Leech 1981:36)

It is necessary at this stage to be clear about my own faith position which is one that believes as Psalm 24.1 says ‘The Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof’. Such a belief does not accept the separating out of ‘the world’ from ‘the holy’ and I believe, with MacIntyre, that ‘the purpose of religion is the hallowing of the world’ (MacIntyre 1985: 1). This is an outward-looking faith that seeks to find the finger of God in the created world and the face of God in other people rather than in the depths of one’s own soul. My own working out of these beliefs is Christian (Whiting 2015) and aligns with Christian humanism but there are also clearly many other interpretations of the rejection of the division of the material and the spiritual in other faiths such as Judaism (Koltun Fromm 2010), Shamanism (Jordan 2001) and Shintoism (Whiting and Gurbai 2015) but not, and this will be quite important in the discussion below, in Buddhism (Lee et al 2009), which maintains a very clear division between the two.

The Implications of Gnostic Thinking for Contemporary Society

Gray (2015) and Voegelin (1975) were mentioned briefly above as both arguing that Gnosticism is pervasive in modern society. I do not wish,

however, to engage more extensively with these texts. Instead, I will focus on Wendell Berry's (1997) *The Unsettling of America*. It may appear surprising to take as a starting point for an analysis of the contemporary significance and resonance of Gnosticism a book written originally in 1982 and predominantly about the consequences of the industrialisation of agriculture in the USA. In addition Berry never even uses the word Gnostic in his text. But in facing his problems as a farmer in the late 20th Century he sums up eloquently the human condition and in particular the impact of the separation of body and spirit or 'the world' and 'the holy' on human society. Much of the rest of this section is therefore given over to Berry and uses his words directly and extensively to comment on the prevalence of Gnostic ideas in contemporary society. Only brief comments are made on Berry's text, usually to make explicit the links to social work.

Berry notes firstly that:

The word health belongs to a family of words, a listing of which will suggest how far the consideration of health must carry us: *heal, whole, wholesome, hale, hallow, holy*....If the body is healthy, then it is whole....Blake said that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul" and thus acknowledges the convergence of health and holiness. In

that, all the convergences and dependences of creation are surely implied.

(Berry 1997: 103)

The key word here is creation. Berry is a creationist but this does not mean creationist as opposed to evolutionist. It means holding particular views about the world as a good gift to humanity. He adds:

Our bodies are also not distinct from the bodies of other people, on which they depend in a complexity of ways from biological to spiritual. They are not distinct from the bodies of plants and animals, with which we are involved in the cycles of feeding and the intricate companionships of ecological systems and of the spirit.

(Berry 1997: 103)

The point about personhood resting in the body but only in relation to other people and their bodies is one which will be picked up and discussed further in relation to social work and phenomenology. Berry further notes:

A medical doctor [or social worker] uninterested in nutrition, in agriculture, in the wholesomeness of the mind and spirit is as absurd as a farmer who is uninterested in health. Our fragmentation of this subject cannot be our cure, because it is our disease. The body cannot be whole alone. Persons cannot be whole alone.... To try to heal the body alone is to collaborate in the destruction of the body.

(Berry 1997:103)

This is why, to make matters explicit, the prospective student's question on vegetarianism discussed in the introduction should not be taken as superficial. A good social worker will see the link between their own nutrition, that of others and the wider impact of such small-scale decisions as what a person eats. Berry further adds:

It is clear to anyone who looks at any crowd that we are wasting our bodies exactly as we are wasting our land. Our bodies are fat, weak, joyless, sickly, ugly, the virtual prey of the manufacturer of medicine and cosmetics.... As for our spirits, they seem more and more to comfort themselves in buying things.

(Berry 1997: 108)

This text was written originally by Berry in the 1980s but the realities and consequences of a lack of care of the body and the distracting trivialities of the consumer society are all the more apparent today.

As noted above Gnosticism can be seen to be as prevalent within the Christian church as outside it. Berry comments eloquently:

For the churchly, the life of the spirit is reduced to a dull preoccupation with getting to Heaven. At best the world is no more than an embarrassment and a trial of the spirit, which is otherwise radically separated from it.

(Berry 1997: 108)

If the engagement of the churches with the world is superficial or fake in the way that Berry describes, that has serious consequences in a situation (such as currently in the UK) where churches are increasingly being seen to be stepping back into social work. If such work in 'the world' is only about rescuing 'the lost' for Heaven then church social work will be, as an existentialist might say, inauthentic. Berry sees this problem as a chronic one for the churches:

The ...separation of the soul from the body and from the world is no disease of the fringe, no aberration, but a fracture that runs through the mentality of institutional religion like a geologic fault. And this rift in the mentality of religion continues to characterize the modern mind, no matter how secular or worldly it becomes.

(Berry 1997: 108)

This last is also an important point. Secularism or worldliness does not diminish the likelihood of a Gnostic response to ‘the world’. It might be argued, for example, that since Berry wrote his comments, western society has become even more worldly. Sex and sexuality, for example, are much more prevalent and present in public life and the sexualised body is no longer hidden. But the key point stands because the flesh and the spirit are, and remain, kept apart.

Social Work and the Body

In recent years there has been an increased focus on the body in social work. Cameron and McDermott (2007) write eloquently about the dangers of

social workers working only in their heads and being unaware of the physical world. They encourage the concept of ‘body cognizant’ social workers. Price and Walker (2015) have similarly written about the body in social work but with more of a focus on the body of the person with whom the social worker is engaging. They write particularly about the danger that the reality of the ‘ill body’ will be marginalised and ignored by society and even by social work. What neither of these texts do, however, is consider the topic of religion and spirituality in relation to either the body of the social worker or the body of the person with whom they are working. The one writer to have done so in detail to date has been Walsh (2009) and her suggestions are returned to below.

The Gnostic Syndrome

The sections above have suggested that social work has not yet fully engaged with the body in relation to spirituality and has speculated that this is because of an implicit acceptance of dualistic understandings of body and spirit. But what are the consequences of this lack of engagement? This question can be helpfully considered with a discussion on work with those who have gone through more extreme interpretations of the meanings of

their own bodies. The link between Gnostic thinking and eating disorders has been made previously; Barrett and Fine (1990) described anorexia nervosa as *The Gnostic Syndrome* and they see the behaviour of people with anorexic symptoms as resorting more and more to 'secretiveness and rituals associated with strivings for purity and control' (Barrett and Fine 1990: 268) and add:

The therapist hopes to help his patients at least to the extent that these patients can view themselves on a certain level as material beings, not just fighting against their own bodies.

(Barrett and Fine 1990: 269)

Similarly, Bell (1984) in his account of the lives and thinking of medieval saints and mystics such as St. Catherine of Sienna makes a direct and pointed link with the experience of individuals diagnosed as anorexic in the 20th Century. For Bell these women are not necessarily passive or powerless and he sees their actions as, in part, responses to the patriarchal power structures of their day. But in both accounts, of the recent and distant past, individuals are described who see the material world as to be avoided or ignored, both in terms of their own bodies and even of food itself. A third example of the possible connection between Gnostic thinking and self-

starvation can be seen in the life and death of the 20th Century philosopher Simone Weil. Weil travelled widely across the intellectual landscape of the 1930s moving from socialist to anarchist and eventually to conservative and catholic influenced positions. But also in the late 1930s Weil studied and came to sympathise with the medieval Cathars. She was very sympathetic towards the idea of a spiritual elite. She did not join the Catholic Church and kept herself apart from the masses (and the Mass). She ended her life as a sick woman refusing to take nourishment just as the spiritual elite among the Cathars had done (Hanratty 1997).

These suggestions that Gnostic beliefs are being lived out in the lives and deaths of modern people are of course speculative, but they cannot be dismissed. They should concentrate the mind of the social work practitioner on the importance of coming to a view on the meaning and significance of the body. Many people with whom they will be working, and certainly not just those who may be have eating disorders, will be carrying deeply held beliefs that their own bodies are somehow impure and that their own physicality, their own pain even (Price and Walker 2015), is to be suppressed or ignored. In recent times, one of the ways in which individuals have been encouraged to become more in touch with their own bodies has been through mindfulness. This idea will now be explored in some detail.

Mindfulness and the Body

One of the most interesting texts on spirituality in social work published in recent years is by Lee et al (2009). They present a model which proposes to integrate body, mind and spirit in practice. It includes two important chapters on the body in social work. They present their model based on the ideas of yin/yang, Taoism and Buddhism whilst making clear that:

Our discussion focuses on these beliefs as philosophies and not as religions. Religious conversion does not have a place in the learning and practice of integrative social work.

(Lee et al 2009: 91)

Lee et al focus on the practice of mindfulness. Since their original work on the topic the idea and practice of mindfulness has flourished in social work circles and it is important to consider it in relation to Gnosticism. Lee et al note that mindfulness originates in Buddhist teaching: 'In the Satipathanna Sutta, the Buddha described four foundations of objects of mindfulness; the body, consciousness, feelings and the Dharma' (Lee et al 2009: 587).

Ostensibly, from the position taken in this chapter, the focus on the body in mindfulness appears to be an extremely positive one. The emphasis is on being present in the body in the moment. The mindful practitioner is encouraged to focus on their breathing in order to generate a calm state in which to observe bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings (MacDonagh 2014). It is clear how this could be a potentially useful skill in social work. For example Ferguson (2011) discusses how a bodily reaction can influence a social work decision. A home may be so dirty that the social worker's skin creeps but that may not necessarily mean that a child or adult is being poorly treated in that home. So if a social worker is mindful and aware of what is happening to their own body and how that might be impacting on their thinking this can only be advantageous in their decision making.

By way of contrast, Lee et al in their explanation of the focus on the body in mindfulness, go on to add 'The suggested focus is on the person, because we are accustomed to focus our attention on the outside, illusory world rather than the inner, real world' (Lee et al 2009: 587). The Buddhist belief that the outer world is illusory is clearly a challenge to a material spirituality. Runciman, in his summary of Manichean Gnosticism, summarises the different positions well:

To the orthodox Christian, Matter is bad, as a result of the Fall, but can be made good through Christ's Sacraments. To the Christian Dualist, Matter is irretrievably bad. To the Brahmin and, still more, to the Buddhist, Matter is an irrelevant thing.

(Runciman 1947: 186)

The Buddhist focuses on the body in order to transcend it and all material reality. Although Gnosticism and Buddhism are clearly very different faith positions (and Runciman is categorical that there is no historical link between the two) in effect there is little practical difference between believing the material world is bad or that it is irrelevant. The result is the same, i.e. a turn inwards. George notes:

Although the idea that self-knowledge alone can lead to spiritual liberation is heretical to mainstream Christianity, it is central to Buddhism. The root of suffering, according to Buddhists, is ignorance concerning the true nature of the self.

(George 1995: 122)

Self-examination is clearly important but there is possibly a fine line between self-examination and self-obsession. MacDonagh (2014) wrote an excoriating piece on mindfulness after attending a series of training sessions. She comments:

This brings me to what really annoys me about being mindful, which is that as far as I can gather, it's Mostly About Me. Sitting concentrating on your breathing is a good way to chill out and de-stress, but it's not a particularly good end in itself.

(MacDonagh 2014)

She goes on to criticise mindfulness as an activity for the self-indulgent and self-obsessed with no practical outlet.

Moss (2005) in his preliminary discussion of spirituality in social work provided a very open and inclusive definition of what spirituality might be but he also added a test for effectiveness. He argued that spirituality in social work should be affirming and outward- looking. It is worth questioning whether the particular focus on the body some interpretations mindfulness is leading to an inwardness that may not always be conducive to good social work. Clearly social workers in their use of mindfulness

might well be outward-looking and purposeful and there are certainly advocates of Buddhist practice who emphasise the importance of an active compassion (Kittisaro and Thanissara 2014). This chapter in no way wishes to denigrate or question Buddhist social work practice, simply to point out that a materially grounded spirituality is something very different. One possible way of broadening out of thinking about the body in a way which might complement mindfulness is through a consideration of the academic discipline of phenomenology in relation to social work.

Phenomenology

Walsh (2009) points to the importance of the work of Levin (1985) and other prominent writers in the field of phenomenology for social work. What is phenomenology? Heidegger, one of its early proponents, writes that it is ‘a special method for gaining access to our experience and making it conceptually explicit’ (Heidegger 1962: 59). The works of Merleau-Ponty (2002) and Levin (1985) have taken the discipline further with their explicit and extended focus on the body. In particular Levin is focused on the significance of the body in relation to other bodies, so not as a turning inwards. He writes:

It is becoming increasingly clear that ...the deepening of experience must eventually be understood as an elemental groundedness as bodily beings. As bodily beings, we are graced with the sense of the body as a whole.

(Levin 1985:291)

There is clearly scope for more work on the connections between a grounded spirituality and phenomenology in social work.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the prevalence of Gnostic tendencies in different interpretations of religion and spirituality. It has encouraged those involved in social work to consider how they might view 'the body' in relation to 'the spirit' and in particular to beware of the tendency to hive off the spiritual and to think of it as something wholly separate from the material world. The possibility that taking such thinking to its limits can result in problems such as eating disorders has been discussed from an historical perspective.

Mindfulness, as a practice which foregrounds an awareness of the body in the moment has been noted as potentially very useful in this regard although concerns have been raised in relation to Buddhist doctrines about ‘the immaterial’ which can inform some contemporary interpretations of mindfulness. Phenomenology, as an approach that does not discredit or minimise the significance of the knowledge gained through the body has been suggested as a potentially valuable approach for practitioners although clearly more work can and should be done on developing the use of this way of thinking in relation to religion and spirituality in social work.

This *Handbook* is a physical artefact that by its very existence demonstrates how far the topic of religion and spirituality in social work has come in the last generation from a time when the topic was not given sufficient credence (Whiting 2008) to where we are today. It is a testament to the hard work and devotion of scholars in the field. But it also represents a threat or a risk. That risk is the Gnostic one, that religion and spirituality might be hived off from normal practice and treated as a specialism for those who are interested.

There is then a short step from there to the secret knowledge of *the illuminate*. This is to be avoided at all costs and if discussion of religion and spirituality in social work is to serve any purpose it must be inclusive and be for, and by, in Leech’s term ‘the common herd’ (1981, 32). So I write, in

conflict with myself, as a specialist scholar in religion and spirituality in social work rejecting the premise of specialist or elite knowledge on this subject. Every social worker should be able to know themselves in their own skin, who they are in that physical sense, and be able to use their sense of their own body in their work with other people. What this chapter has argued is for the possibility of physical awareness also linking to spiritual awareness or, more simply, a spirituality of the body.

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