

Spirituality: 'a way to live, a way to heal'

Fevronia

Christodoulidi shares
her experience of
involvement with
Omilos Eksipiretiton –
The Servers' Society

“

What exists, visible
and invisible, is
nothing more than
the projection of the
Entity's Essence.

”

Dimitris Kakalidis¹

What would it feel like if you encountered a person or philosophy that brought you 'home' to yourself in that maze of seeking meaning and life direction? What if you were introduced to a way of thinking that revealed the 'essence' of our existence, our relationships and life events, beyond illusions? This is how I could describe my experience of encountering 'Omilos Eksipiretiton'² (the Servers' Society) in 1994, when still living in my birth city of Athens. As a young adult, I was restless and thirsty for answers to my big questions; some of us may recall moments or encounters that had some quality of 'awakening'. It feels difficult to share, within the limits of a journal article, the numerous highlights of my experience of finding a spiritual community like the one I will discuss below. Having been a voracious reader, including the literature on matters related to spirituality, what continues to fascinate me with this particular philosophy is the fact that it has simplified for me the actual meaning of what it is to 'embody' and acknowledge the spiritual dimension in all aspects of daily living, from the most ordinary experiences to the most extraordinary.

After seven years of being immersed in the study and application of the teachings I was introduced to in Athens, I moved to the UK where I qualified as a therapist. During the period of my studying and development as a counsellor, my prerogative was to discover ways of integrating my previous spiritually informed knowledge and experiential insights gained as a 'spiritual seeker' at the Servers' Society and the scientific input I



The society's mission, though multi-faceted, could be summarised as being two-fold: the development of human conscience and the dissemination of spirituality



was receiving during my training. Along with regular discussions with spiritually informed supervisors, this resulted in me conducting two research projects between 2002 and 2006, one related to the spiritual dimension in the therapeutic relationship² and another focusing on the interplay amongst counselling, spirituality and culture³. In 2010 I completed a PhD in Counselling on a School of Education Scholarship, being part of a group of doctoral students who mostly conducted research on spirituality-related topics, under the supervision of Professor William West at the University of Manchester.

I first presented the work of the Servers' Society at a conference in London in 2010⁴, this event being the starting point for a number of presentations to different audiences, receiving positive feedback. This article is both a celebration of the Society's presence in the UK in the last two years as well as an invitation to develop a cross-culturally informed dialogue about spirituality in practice, through further such encounters.

Introducing the Servers' Society

'Omilos Eksipiretiton' (ie the Servers' Society) is a spiritual centre based in Athens, Greece. It was founded as a non-profit organisation in 1980 by philosopher and poet Dimitris Kakalidis, aiming at teaching a practical philosophy about acquiring a spiritual perspective in everyday life. Kakalidis was a living example of someone with 'embodied knowledge' of the spiritual realm. The director of the Society since 1985, author Klairi Lykiardopoulou, offers extended accounts of his work in several volumes⁵. Following his death in 1995, those who lived and studied alongside him continue his work to date, under the supervision of Andreas Dritsas and Paraskevi Kostopetrou, who are responsible for all activities and the dissemination of the

teaching in Greece and abroad.

For over 30 years the Society's work has included organising visits to hospitals and several institutions, responding to contact and distant spiritual healing requests, offering performances and seminars with a healing or literary focus, and delivering weekend and summer retreats. At the Society's premises in Athens, various group work sessions are on offer, including self-study groups, relaxation groups, meditation and spiritual healing training, sessions focusing on applying spiritual principles to relationships, groups for creative expression such as 'dromena' (role-play) and 'chorodromena' (a dance-movement ritual practice), seminars exploring the spiritual dimension in music, poetry and art, a group discussing spirituality in education and others focusing on addressing issues related to current affairs and global, contemporary concerns. Spiritual healing sessions are offered on a daily basis, free of charge. All activities are delivered by volunteers: all involved, from the director herself to the board of trustees, the administrators and group facilitators offer their time and services without any financial or other gain.

The Society's mission, though multi-faceted, could be summarised as being two-fold: the development of human conscience and the dissemination of spirituality. There are various activities through which this is approached, the main being:

The teaching and practice of spiritual healing⁶ – this is known in the UK through practitioners in the field such as Harry Edwards and the National Federation of Spiritual Healers⁷

Personal development: facilitated through individual sessions and attendance of weekly group work sessions

Cultural activities: members are introduced to ways of creative expression such as theatre, poetry, music and the arts, from a spiritual perspective

Publications: the society members have established 'Megas Seirios Publications'⁸, presenting the works of various members.

A philosophy of 'synthesis'

The Society's philosophy is a 'synthesis' perspective, mainly drawing from ancient Greek thinking – such as the well-known Socratic dialectic and maieutic approach. It embraces all aspects related to understanding the self, relationships and the world, through the lens of the multiple ways of expressing our innate spiritual nature. In that sense, it argues that all schools of thought, religions, sciences and philosophical movements, no matter what differentiations or principles they adopt as a way of approaching ontological questions, are fundamentally expressing the 'essence' of the same, unifying force. Something I learnt when attending groups focusing on the analysis of literature, when acquiring a spiritual perspective, is that there is often a common thread that goes beyond subjective interpretations; this 'synthesis lens' encourages the discovery of the common elements, without ignoring any significant distinctions.

How does this translate to one's daily life? Those studying this practical philosophy, besides practising any experiential exercises, learn to acquire a 'lifestyle' and holistic worldview which does not include or exclude any aspect of human experience but encompasses all through an attitude of broadened vision and discriminatory thinking. A core principle in this teaching is that each individual's path is unique; therefore everyone embarking on a spiritual journey finds their own way, according to their idiosyncratic makeup. Parallel to this

respect for individual needs, important attention is given to the significance of one's development through group dynamics, hence the reason why the teaching is delivered through group work sessions.

This philosophy suggests three main avenues through which we can develop self-awareness and cultivate a lifestyle of spiritual attunement and holistic thinking. These need to be practised together regularly, as a way of learning to 'embody' such a perspective:

Learning to reflect on ourselves, through the position of the 'observer': this is an attitude of observing our behaviours, thoughts, feelings, physical responses and relational dynamics through a neutral, non-judgemental lens. Journaling on a daily basis is a core practice

Learning to practise relaxation and meditation: the benefits of developing an awareness of mind-body-spirit states are well known to those engaged in personal development

Engaging with actions of service, in our immediate circles and in the wider community.

Something that emerges in one's awareness when practising in such a way is an awareness of the 'energy realm', that I reflect upon below.

'Energy follows thought'

The idea that energy follows thought, where the latter manifests itself in the material world, is described in the popular culture as the law of attraction, a principle that pays attention to the power of positive thinking. The notions of the 'energy field', 'healing touch', 'intuition' and so on have been discussed by both esoteric teachers of several cultures and traditions but also contemporary researchers, even in the medical field, such as Aldridge⁹. In a recent article, Rowan¹⁰ argues that British people tend to avoid concepts like 'surrender' or 'soul' (or we could add 'energy') that have some tone of irrationality. However, my experience of discussing such ideas in conferences in the UK – particularly in multicultural cities like London – is that there is an active curiosity about them, especially from an experiential perspective. What appears significant is that a spiritual perspective is inclusive and

unifying; it applies to everyone, even those who do not believe in a God, a higher force or any spiritual belief system. Compassion, non-dualism, acceptance, unity of mind-body-soul, and forgiveness are all considered to be facilitative attitudes towards acquiring a spiritually informed lifestyle.

The practice of spiritual healing is a 'sacred' manifestation of the power of positive thinking; a spiritual healer learns to channel healing energy, activating as such one's self-healing resources. When discovering our spiritual nature, which is accompanied by an inherent healing potential, there is the realisation that everyone can be a spiritual healer, able to address physical, emotional, and relational issues, through free, intended will. Therefore, there is a process of re-learning what is already known but not always acknowledged. If it were to move beyond definitions that restrict an understanding of spiritual healing as a way of managing physical or psychological illnesses through guided distribution of energy, spiritual healing becomes a 'way of living'; it encompasses all attitudes towards situations and relationships at an intra- and interpersonal level but also more collective and global concerns.

The presence of the Society in the UK

As mentioned earlier, I first presented the work of the Society as a keynote speaker at a day conference organised by the Ethnic Health Initiative in London in November 2010. Following this event, a number of presentations, delivered by the heads of the Society and a few members, including myself, were delivered at conferences organised at the University of Manchester (January 2011) and the University of Keele (March 2011), the BPS – Transpersonal



The practice of spiritual healing is a 'sacred' manifestation of the power of positive thinking



Psychology Section (15th Annual Conference, September 2011) and finally a day conference at the Arcola Theatre in London (October 2012).

These events have attracted diverse audiences such as mental health professionals, researchers, educators, counsellors and psychotherapists, philologists or scientists but also people seeking inspiration for a more fulfilling life. The latest day conference in London, titled 'Spirituality: a way to live, a way to heal', was the final calling for writing this article. Terms related to the spiritual, mystical or transcendent are highly debatable, meaning different things to different people and provoking reactions ranging from defensiveness and puzzlement to awe and blissful embrace. There is a fruitful debate related to the use of such terms and experiences in a therapy context, (for example, see the various writings by William West¹¹). Authors such as Culliford¹² and Tacey¹³ discuss the idea that spirituality is not something that can be put under scrutiny or scientific analysis but more something to be explored experientially as if one is at an 'adventure park' and finds expression in the playground. Our mission at the Society is to create a 'spiritual village' where people gather together from all over the world to share the gift of such synthesis of spiritual teachings. Regardless of any barriers related to language or definitions, these conference encounters proved to be examples of a 'relational communion' as vividly described by an attendant.

The practitioner's voice

The transpersonal and spiritual perspective in psychotherapy has been discussed by various authors in the literature – many of such accounts are appearing in *Thresholds*. These have been readings that have informed my thinking in various ways. I found that being introduced to spiritual ideas and developing a spiritual practice, before embarking on my formal counselling training offered me a different base through which to filter or inform my understandings of the knowledge that I was exposed to at a later stage. Additionally, being involved in supervision and research circles where I could bring my spiritually informed working style has been a fundamental aspect of my work.

I see anything that occurs in the therapeutic encounter as a process resulting from ‘referring’ to the spiritual dimension

Finding colleagues, fellow seekers and fellow researchers – involved in their own processes of developing a spiritually informed integrative approach – has been fruitful and energising in many ways.

I am currently employed as student and staff counsellor at a busy counselling service of a British University, where I see 20 clients per week, supervise trainee counsellors and deliver a variety of experiential workshops. I am often aware that the spiritual perspective I have towards my practice is the catalyst that strengthens my resilience, enables me to avoid burnout and contributes to any aspect of ‘effectiveness’ within my role. I see anything that occurs in the therapeutic encounter as a process resulting from ‘referring’ to the spiritual dimension, even if not openly articulated to the clients themselves. I am always intrigued and fascinated by noticing that, very often, the clients who come to see me are having some form of ‘spiritual quest’ themselves and are seeking ways to articulate or understand it better. Interestingly, this is often reported by other colleagues when reflecting on the clients who enter their counselling rooms. I feel humbled to be in a position to be able to accompany clients on such a journey, just as I have been accompanied myself.

Towards a cross-culturally informed dialogue on spirituality: an invitation

It is acknowledged that a definition of wellbeing is culturally bound; also, depending on the health beliefs of a culture, there are corresponding healing identities and narratives, sometimes including the spiritual dimension as well as attempts to integrate traditional healing practices in counselling and psychotherapy (see the interesting works by Fukuyama and Sevig¹⁴ and Moodley and West¹⁵). In a multicultural society, like that of the UK, the presence of

communities from diverse cultural backgrounds, different religions and various values systems, attempting to live harmoniously together, is both calling for and hopefully allowing such encounters to take place.

The recent day conference in London ended with attendants expressing interest in getting involved in the teachings and the Society’s activities further. In response to this request, this article is intended as a ‘bridge’ to assist that encounter to happen, either in Greece or in the UK. For any correspondence regarding spiritual healing requests, presentations, conference, retreats or visits in the UK, Greece or elsewhere, you can contact the Omilos Eksipiretiton on: info@omilos-ekspiretiton.gr and sign in the newsletter on the website: <http://en.omilos-ekspiretiton.gr/>

Finally, a group introducing this philosophy to those interested in the UK was set up in April this year, with monthly meetings in London and is open to new members. Please contact the society for more information, if you wish to attend.



Biography

Dr. Fevronia Christodoulidi is a BACP accredited counsellor, currently employed by the University of Cardiff, Wales and the Metanoia Institute, London. She has been trained as a spiritual healer at the Servers’ Society in Athens, being an active member since 1994. Fevronia has a particular interest in spirituality and culture in relation to counselling and psychotherapy and has conducted research in the field. Email: fe9chr@gmail.com



References

1. Kakalidis D. The revelation of the entity. Athens: Megas Seirios Publications; 2012.
2. <http://en.omilos-ekspiretiton.gr/>
3. Christodoulidi F. Counselling and the spiritual quest: an exploration of the spiritual dimension in the journey of self-discovery and the therapeutic relationship. University of Durham: MA Thesis; 2002.
4. Christodoulidi F. Spirituality and culture in counselling and psychotherapy. In: West W (ed). Exploring therapy, spirituality and healing. Palgrave Macmillan; 2010.
5. <http://www.megas-seirios.gr/>
6. Lykiardopoulou K. Spiritual healing: a human potential in theory and practice. Athens: Megas Seirios Publications; 2009.
7. NFSH. National Federation of Spiritual Healers’ code of conduct. Sunbury on Thames: NFSH; 1999.
8. <http://www.megas-seirios.gr>
9. Aldridge D. Spirituality, healing and medicine: return to the silence. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 2000.
10. Rowan J. Mind, body and soul. Therapy Today. 2012; 23(1):22-25.
11. West W. Spiritual issues in therapy: relating experience to practice. Basingstoke: Palgrave; 2004.
12. Culliford L. The psychology of spirituality: an introduction. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 2011.
13. Tacey D. The spirituality revolution: the emergence of contemporary spirituality. Hove: Brunner-Routledge; 2004.
14. Fukuyama MA. Sevig TD. Integrating spirituality into multi-cultural counselling. Thousand Oaks; 1999.
15. Moodley R. West W (eds). Integrating traditional healing practices into counselling and psychotherapy. London: Sage; 2005.



Infinitely beloved: a therapist explores divine intimacy
Brian Thorne
Publisher: PCCS Books, 2012
978-1-906254-52-0
£9

Based on a series of theological lectures given at Sarum College, this is a new edition of a book first published in 2003. Brian Thorne is well known as a therapist and speaker who links his experience as a counsellor with his faith, seeing both theology and counselling as being about ‘the exercise of power in the service of love’.

Each of the five lectures forms a chapter in the book. Most contain a significant proportion of autobiographical material, whether linked to his devotion at the shrine of St Julian of Norwich, formative experiences at George Lyward’s work at Finchdon Manor, or travels in Cyprus. Around these personal details he weaves his thoughts on the significance of intimacy, problems with close relationship in contemporary society, and perspectives on the person of Jesus and the nature of God.

A central theological thesis is that Jesus was the prototype of a new humanity, inviting us to claim our divinity. Seeing himself as a ‘reluctant prophet’ he rails against so much that is wrong but continues to hope for change, based in belief in human resilience.

This new edition ends with his Julian Lecture given in May 2012 in which he reflects very effectively on an edition of the television series *Casualty* in which unconditional love was vividly acted out.

This book is unusual in the mix of its content. It will appeal to therapists who, like him, find links between Rogerian theory and Christian faith. His very positive (some would say excessively so) view of the human condition and the ‘evolution’ of humanity, may be too much for some, but it would be hard to argue with his observations on the poor health of society, Church, and individual human relationships, nor with his challenge to love and allow ourselves to be loved.

Pamela Cram
Counsellor and Methodist Minister.



Beyond tribal loyalties: personal stories of Jewish peace activists
Avigail Abarbanel (ed)
ISBN (10) 1-4438-3796-2
£14.99

The book contains 25 individual stories, each one reflecting a subject’s personal journey, taking us back through their family histories, cultures, as well as the environments that they were brought up in. The authors of these stories, the activists, at different times in their lives, had all questioned and revalidated the behaviour of the Jewish people of Israel, which had created a change in their view of how the Jewish Israelis were behaving, and led to them subsequently acting in accordance with their own personal values.

Also explored are the effects, and after-effects, of Jewish people being victims of the Holocaust in the Second World War, where so many people lost their lives, families and homes, and the difficulty of being able to trust other people following such terrible events. We are told that a few years after the Second World War finished, Palestinian families were being removed from their homes in Israel, as the Jewish Israelis over time sought to widen the boundaries of what they classed as their homelands. The conflict and fighting still continues today.

The editor, Avigail Abarbanel, a humanistic psychotherapist, was encouraged by Kenneth Ring, editor of *Letters from Palestine*¹, to tell her story: how she was born in Israel, became a soldier in the Israeli army, and now lives in Scotland, actively supporting the Palestinians. Abarbanel in turn asked other Jewish peace activists to join with her to create this book.

Beyond Tribal Loyalties sheds light on the reactions and confrontation one may face from family and friends when changing our views and opinions to ones which do not fall in line, or differ from, other people’s points of views or perspectives, and the disruption this may create. Abarbanel, expresses how there is a need to gain emotional resilience, when facing this kind of opposition.

This book is an interesting read, sharing as it does the contributors’ experiences and enabling us to view the behaviours and responses of humans to other humans. I am conscious however in writing this review that as yet I have not read widely about this particular situation/conflict in Israel from the 1940s onwards, so I can only comment from a personal perspective

Susan Howlett
Counsellor

Reference
1. Ring K. Letters from Palestine. Wheatmark Inc; 2010.