CHAPTER 1

Conceptual issues in spiritual healing

Fraser Watts

Spiritual healing raises challenging issues. Religious traditions such as Christianity make strong claims about healing. The gospels are full of healing stories, and it is claimed that the followers of Jesus continued such healings. In the twentieth century and into the twenty-first there has been a marked revival of interest in healing within various faith traditions, and in non-religious settings too. Is it credible that spiritual healing takes place? If so, how are such healings to be understood and explained in our scientific culture?

First, though, there are really difficult problems of definition about spiritual healing. What do we mean by 'spiritual' healing? In considering this, it may be helpful to make a distinction between different things that 'spiritual' can be applied to in this context. There can be:

1 Healing in which spiritual practices play a role
2 Healing in which spiritual aspects of the human person are presumed to be involved
3 Healing that is explained in terms of what are presumed to be spiritual processes

I will consider each of these in turn. In doing so, it is important to remember that spiritual healing now occurs in both religious and non-religious settings. On the one hand, there is an explicitly Christian spiritual healing movement, most evident in charismatic churches, but also found in pilgrimages to Lourdes and other such sites. On the other hand, there is an explicitly secular spiritual healing movement, with links to 'New Age' culture. Some of what needs to be said about spiritual healing applies equally to healing in religious and non-religious settings; some of it is specific to spiritual healing that occurs in one setting or the other.

THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICES IN HEALING

Spiritual healing can be seen as healing in which spiritual practices play a role. The concept of spiritual practices is fairly straightforward. There is now quite an extensive and rigorous academic literature on the definition of spirituality, and on the distinction between spirituality and religion (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005, pp. 21–42). Though there are various possible approaches to the definition of spirituality, it generally includes participation in spiritual practices, such as meditation or prayer, though it often shifts the emphasis away from the structure of beliefs in which those spiritual practices might be embedded. Spiritual practices are found within all of the major world faith traditions, but are also now found outside any established faith tradition.

It is easy to see how spiritual practices could enhance healing processes, and some of the evidence for that is reviewed in this book (see Larson *et al.* 1998; Koenig *et al.* 2001). On this view, healings might be deemed to be spiritual simply because of the spiritual practices involved. That would neither invoke any kind of spiritual ontology of the human person, nor require any kind of spiritual explanation. Healing that is facilitated by spiritual practices could be explained entirely in terms of the impact of spiritual practices on psychosomatic processes. It seems highly likely that this provides an adequate account of at least some of what is regarded as 'spiritual' healing. It is also likely that psychosomatic processes play at least some role in all cases of spiritual healing.

It is worth noting that spiritual practices can be used not on their own but in conjunction with medical or surgical interventions. There are indications that the effectiveness of ordinary treatments can be enhanced by the explicit use of spiritual practices; medical and surgical treatments tend to work better when a 'whole-person' approach is taken. There are also indications that attending to spiritual aspects of the healing process can enhance the overall effectiveness of medical and surgical treatment, just as there is increasing recognition of the importance in psychotherapy of addressing religious issues constructively. So there is a strong pragmatic case for attending to the spiritual dimension of healing. The suggestion that spiritual practices play a useful auxiliary role in healing makes no strong or difficult assumptions.

Spiritual practices are now to be found both in religious and non-religious contexts. (By a 'religious' context, I mean the context provided by the structures, practices and assumptions of one of the world's recognized faith traditions.) It will be apparent that spiritual healing, in the

sense of healing that is facilitated by spiritual practice, may or may not be explicitly 'religious' in the sense of occurring in such a setting. Some healing takes place in religious settings and is embedded within religious assumptions, but much does not. Equally, healing that takes place in a recognizably religious setting may or may not involve spiritual practice. Surgery can be undertaken in a hospital with an explicitly religious ethos. The religious context of healing and the role of spiritual practice in healing are conceptually independent. In practice, however, there is a close association between religious and spiritual healing, in that most religious healing also uses spiritual practices.

A similar distinction could be made between religious and spiritual experience, though those concepts are not always distinguished. Religious experiences, I suggest, are experiences that are interpreted in a religious way. Spiritual or mystical experiences, in contrast, are experiences with a distinct quality, such as a strong sense of unity. In terms of this distinction, experiences can be either religious, or spiritual/mystical, or both. It seems likely that experiences that are both religious and spiritual have the most far-reaching consequences for the people concerned.

There was no doubt a time when it was unnecessary to make these distinctions, as the religious frame of reference was used so comprehensively in Western culture that no one would have considered the possibility of spiritual healing that was not interpreted religiously. However, with the breakdown of the comprehensive application of a religious frame of reference in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it has become increasingly common for spiritual healing to occur outside the context of religious practice, and to be interpreted without a religious frame of reference.

Some spiritual practices that can contribute to healing, such as meditation, are general spiritual practices. They are most commonly practised outside any explicit healing context, but can nevertheless contribute to healing. Other spiritual practices, such as the laying on of hands, are used with the specific intention of bringing healing about. The latter raise complex questions to which I will return in the concluding chapter of this book.

I suggest that spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation and laying on of hands, can contribute to spiritual healing in a way that parallels how psychotherapy can contribute to psychological healing. There may also be a particular role for the religious minister or healer in spiritual healing that is parallel to, but different from, that of the psychotherapist in psychological healing. Paul Tillich makes such a point when he distinguishes the role of the psychologist in removing neurotic anxiety from the role of

the minister in 'mediating the essential' (Dourley 1997, pp. 211–22). However, there is nothing specifically religious or theological here. A secular spiritual healer can also 'mediate the essential', and secular spiritual healing can also be enhanced by spiritual practices.

HEALING THAT INVOLVES THE SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF THE PERSON

My second way of understanding the concept of spiritual healing is healing that involves the 'spiritual' aspects of the person being healed. But what are they? This is a question that has not been much addressed recently, but there are some useful pointers to draw on.

One comes from the Jungian psychologist James Hillman, who in his paper 'Peaks and vales' (1979) makes a strong case for the distinction between spirit and soul, and uses it to make a parallel distinction between spiritual direction and psychotherapy. For Hillman, spirit is the aspect of a person that tends to 'rise above' the problems of life, whereas soul tends to 'go deep'. Spirit desires and brings liberation, whereas soul is attentive to pathology. Spirit is single-minded, whereas soul values complexity.

This distinction of Hillman's between soul and spirit can yield a distinction between two kinds of healing: psychological and spiritual. Psychological healing operates best where there are problems that have a psychosomatic component, and would normally proceed through psychotherapy. The kind of healing that would be associated with what Hillman calls spirit might be related to what psychotherapists call a 'flight into health', a concept that is discussed by Bruce Kinsey in Chapter 6.

Though 'flight into health' is a disparaging phrase, the fact that it is a recognized concept suggests that there is a real phenomenon here, albeit one that is not yet well understood. I suggest that flight into health (or rising above illness) may not always be pathological. There may well be relatively healthy or unhealthy forms of this process. The main concern about flight into health is that such healing tends to be transitory. However, there may be ways of making it more enduring. There may be ways in which the benefits of spiritual healing can be extended by spiritual practice. Also, the relationship with a human healer can be replaced by a healing relationship with God that is more permanent and independent of circumstances. There may be other ways in which the processes that lead to spiritual healing can be internalized in a way that makes them enduring.

It needs to be emphasized that the distinction between soul and spirit can be made within a holistic view of the human person, and of how spiritual healing takes place. I see spiritual healing as being holistic, in that it involves body, mind and spirit. I do not assume that mind or spirit are *separate* from body; the concept of spiritual healing need not imply a return to substance dualism (or to a three-substance view).

Let us assume an emergentist view of mind in which mental powers are seen as emerging from the physical body (Clayton 2006). In a similar way, spirit can be seen as emerging from body and mind. Philosophical theology has learned the lessons of post-war philosophy of mind, and recognizes that mind should not be seen as a substance that is separate from body. First, it is best seen in adjectival terms, as mental properties or powers, rather than as referring to a thing called 'mind'. Second, though there is a conceptual distinction between mind and brain (or body), they cannot actually be separated or divided; as Coleridge often insisted, distinctions do not imply divisions. Third, though mental properties and powers are real enough, they arise from body and brain, and do not have a separate origin.

There can be healing that is psychological (i.e. healing that can be explained psychologically), and such healing can be formulated in a way that is consistent with all the above assumptions about mind. It does not imply healing by a mind that is separate from the body. On the contrary, the concept of psychosomatic medicine is remarkably holistic, and built on the idea that psychological processes are closely intertwined with physical ones. Psychosomatic healing does not rest on a flight into radical mind–body dualism.

The concept of spiritual healing should be approached in a similar way. I have argued elsewhere that the lessons of recent philosophy of mind should be applied to how we think about soul qualities (Watts 2001). Soul and spirit are not separate from body and mind, any more than mind is separate from body. Mind and spirit are distinguishable aspects of the human person, but not separate entities. So talk of 'spiritual' healing does not assume that 'spirit' is something separate and distinct from the rest of a person. It is spiritual in the sense of being healing in which the spiritual aspects of the person are significant, rather than being healing that is exclusively spiritual. Indeed, it makes no sense to suggest that healing could be purely spiritual.

The issues that arise here seem fairly similar whether spiritual healing is undertaken in religious or non-religious contexts. There is a longer tradition of debate in Christianity than in contemporary secular culture

about whether to make a twofold distinction between body and soul or spirit, or a threefold distinction between body, soul and spirit, but the issues are essentially the same. I have suggested that the threefold distinction is helpful, but it should not be thought of as concerning three separate substances.

SPIRITUAL EXPLANATIONS OF HEALING

The above concept of spiritual healing can in principle be understood entirely in anthropological (human) terms, even though spiritual healing may make use of human processes that are not yet well understood. However there is a further sense of spiritual healing as healing that involves transcendent resources and which requires an explanation in spiritual terms.

This radical concept of spiritual healing involves a power or energy that can be called 'spiritual' and which is central and indispensable to healing. Almost all those engaged in spiritual healing assume they can become channels of a healing energy that transcends themselves. Such healing energy is generally assumed, in some sense, to be 'spiritual'. It is an interesting point of similarity in the assumptions made by both Christian and secular healers that the healer is a channel of a healing power that transcends them, and that they are not themselves the source of this healing power (see Chapter 5). The healing power may be understood in different ways in Christian and secular forms of spiritual healing, but they agree on its dependence on transcendent resources.

Those with a religious frame of reference will want to name the source of healing energy as 'God'. Others, in secular settings, will want to conceptualize it in other ways, perhaps just as 'healing energy'. However, it is important not to confuse the question of whether or not transcendent resources for healing are conceptualized in theological terms with the quite separate question of whether or not healing depends on the grace of God. Even though secular spiritual healing may proceed outside an explicit framework of religious belief, it should not be assumed to proceed independently of God. A Christian theologian would surely recognize that all human efforts at healing take place within God's created order and are in accordance with His purposes. That is as true of secular spiritual healing as it is of medical science. Secular healing may be outside faith or theology, but it is surely not outside God.

This is a point made very clearly by Paul Meehl in one of the most rigorous books published so far on psychology and theology (1958).

Meehl rejects the distinction between spiritual healing and all other modes of healing. The fundamental distinction, he argues, is between direct cures (such as the miracles described in Jesus' ministry) and indirect cures through medicine, psychotherapy and the like. 'The important thing to remember is that God is always the primary cause in restoring health' (Meehl 1958, p. 307).

Bringing God into the discussion radically transforms the sense in which spiritual healing can be deemed to be 'spiritual'. Philosophically, the sense in which God is spiritual is very different from that in which humans are spiritual. We can take an emergentist view of human spirituality in which the spiritual aspect of humans is grounded in the physical and mental aspects, distinguishable from them, but not independent or separable. However, it is not appropriate to take a similar emergentist view of the sense in which God is spirit (Clayton 2006). Theologically, the world emerges from God, not God from the world. So the involvement of God in spiritual healing can make it radically spiritual, in a way that is quite different from the involvement of human spirituality in healing.

Theologically, spiritual healing seems to be a particular example of divine action in the natural world, and divine action is a topic that has recently been much discussed by those concerned with the interface between science and religion (Saunders 2002). Most participants in this discussion have wanted to avoid either eliminating the concept of divine action altogether or, on the other hand, seeing it as a supernatural intervention in the natural world that overturns the laws of nature. To eliminate special divine action is to jettison a concept that has been central to the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, there are both theological and scientific reasons for refraining from seeing it as a divine intervention that contravenes the laws of nature.

From a scientific standpoint, 'intervention' by God looks improbable, and there appears to be no scientific evidence for it. From a theological point of view it is unattractive because it involves the assumption that God overturns laws of nature that emanate from Him, and which it would be more consistent with his faithfulness and constancy to uphold. It also risks marginalizing God's action in the world to a few occasions when exceptional things occur, and neglecting the sense that the ordinary world depends constantly on God's general providence.

Healing raises particular issues beyond those raised by other cases of divine action, issues that have not been adequately considered. Unlike many cases of divine action, spiritual healing is often explicitly sought.

Those seeking healing, whether seeking it for themselves or others, often use spiritual practices such as laying on of hands to bring healing about. So there is a distinctive combination of human initiative and presumed divine action involved in spiritual healing.

TRANSCENDENCE AND SCIENCE

Let us suppose that spiritual healing actually occurs, in the radical sense of healing that is dependent on transcendent resources, whether or not they are conceptualized theologically. How does spiritual healing in that sense relate to a scientific worldview?

It is a mistake to ask whether spiritual healing should be understood scientifically *or* theologically. They represent complementary perspectives on spiritual healing, an approach which I have argued elsewhere is essential to a proper conception of the relationship between theology and science (Watts 1998). There are certainly aspects of spiritual healing that need to be conceptualized theologically rather than scientifically. However, there are other aspects that need to be conceptualized scientifically rather than theologically. Spiritual healing can be understood more adequately when it is approached both theologically and scientifically, rather than by either discipline alone.

I want to avoid making a sharp distinction between healing phenomena that are amenable to naturalistic explanation, and other 'spiritual' or supernatural healing phenomena that are not so amenable. That distinction arises from a rigid view of what the laws of nature permit and, historically, it is only since the scientific revolution that a rigid view of the laws of nature has been widely considered. I suggest that there are no good reasons for regarding the laws of nature as invariant laws to which no exceptions are possible. Only if we believe that we know the full range of phenomena permitted by the laws of nature can we presume to identify certain phenomena as 'natural', and other phenomena as lying outside them and therefore 'supernatural'. The Medical Bureau at Lourdes seems wrong-headed from this point of view, in that it only regards healing as 'spiritual' if it is totally inexplicable in natural terms.

It is better to see healing in terms of a subtle interpenetration of the natural and the spiritual, rather than in terms of a sharp disjunction between them. I see healing as representing an enhancement of what normally happens under the laws of nature rather than an overturning of those laws. Science is gradually becoming increasingly emancipated in its ontology and the range of processes it is prepared to accept. As it

does so, there will be less and less reason for regarding exceptional phenomena as outside the laws of nature.

SCIENTIFIC PARADIGMS AND SPIRITUAL HEALING

There seems no reason why spiritual healing, in a radical sense, should not be studied by natural science and to some degree understood by it. Some see spiritual healing as, by definition, lying outside natural science. However, I would argue that whether or not this is so depends on how broadly natural science is conceived. Natural science at present may be unable to comprehend spiritual healing in a radical sense, but there is no reason why natural science should remain limited in that way. I would want to press the case for an emancipated natural science that will be able to study and understand whatever forms of spiritual healing occur.

The pressure for an emancipation of science comes at least as much from within science as from outside it. The task of science is to investigate and understand whatever is present or occurs in the world. If science encounters genuine phenomena (and I assume spiritual healing to be one of these), its task is to investigate and understand. If it finds its present theoretical frameworks inadequate for doing that, the theoretical frameworks must be expanded.

In any particular period, science works with particular paradigms. It is a feature of scientific methodology that it tries to explain phenomena as simply as possible. Science often adopts a working hypothesis of the form that all real phenomena can be explained within a certain framework. Such frameworks are only particular scientific paradigms, they are not science itself. When a paradigm proves inadequate for understanding a genuine phenomenon, science has no alternative but to replace it with a broader paradigm that is more consistent with known phenomena. Though I assume that spiritual healing can, to some extent, be understood scientifically, I concede that the science needed to understand spiritual healing is not yet fully available at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We are only at the foothills of the human sciences and are not yet in any position to lay down the law about what is/is not credible scientifically. There is still much too much that we don't understand.

There is nothing reductionist about my claim that spiritual healing can be understood scientifically. It is not a claim of the form, 'spiritual healing is nothing but xyz'. I am not claiming that spiritual healing can be adequately understood in terms of the theoretical frameworks currently adopted by science. For example, I am not claiming that spiritual healing

is really just a psychological phenomenon. I want both to admit the reality and power of spiritual healing, but also to assert that science is potentially capable of taking steps towards understanding it. A complementary theological account will always remain essential in any comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

My approach here is influenced by my general view of the development of science, and the place of paradigm shifts within it. Following Kuhn and his concept of paradigm shifts (Kuhn 1962; Gutting 1980), I see no reason to accept that modern medical science is definitive, and that the current paradigmatic assumptions will reign for all time. Indeed, it seems clear that there are signs of strain within the current paradigm that may lead to it being revised in significant ways. The inconvenient fact that some 'alternative' approaches to healing, such as acupuncture, seem to be effective, at least in certain contexts (Vickers 1996, pp. 303–11), is a major problem for the current paradigm, as it often cannot make any sense of the assumptions on which they are based.

Paradigm shifts are always an uncomfortable matter. Kuhn originally suggested that paradigms were incommensurable, and that non-rational factors determined the shift from one paradigm to another. However, I think the consensus would now be that both rational and non-rational factors are involved. On the rational side, there is a judgement to be made about whether there is a sufficient accumulation of inconvenient facts that defy incorporation within current assumptions to justify a paradigm shift. On the non-rational side, there is the hostility to new thinking that comes from those who fear that their approach will have to undergo radical readjustment, and the opportunism of those who hope to make their names spearheading a new paradigm.

Among those who are committed to a dialogue between religious and scientific approaches concerning spiritual healing there are at least two significant points of debate. One concerns how broad or narrow a version of science to adopt; the other concerns the methodology of relating science and religion, and whether science is allowed to dictate what can legitimately be said from a religious viewpoint, to the extent that it becomes what Polkinghorne calls 'assimilation' rather than 'consonance' (1996).

It may be helpful here to make an analogy with debates about evolution, where one can distinguish three broad positions. There are narrow Darwinians who assume that everything in evolution can be attributed to natural selection. There are broad Darwinians such as Stephen Jay Gould and Simon Conway Morris who operate within Darwinian