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ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE: Some healthy comment

Introduction

We see the health insurance company's advertisement on TV — a patient lies face-down on a table while a man chants as he slaps together two fish over the patient — and we smile at this over-the-top expression of Alternative Medicine (AM).

The advertisement has a serious side, though. The particular company is telling the public that it includes some AM practices in its schemes. By inference, much of AM is being legitimised. The history of hawking elixirs makes many people suspicious of AM. Yet, the modern popularity of AM is undeniable.

What are Christians to think of AM? Some opinion is unavoidable, for Christians will be and are being asked by well-meaning friends and neighbours to consider involvement in AM.

A wide variety of opinions exist — from the “swear by it” attitude through to outright scepticism¹ and ridicule of all AM practices — and arguments over the merits of AM can become very heated.

This presentation does not seek to embark on debate. Rather, it seeks to offer brief comment and reminder on realities that need to be borne in mind as opinions are formed and decisions undertaken.² The stimulus to what follows was a phonecall to the LCA's Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions, the caller seeking opinion on Iridology. The Commission considered that some comment on AM might be healthy for the LCA.

Brief Observations of Alternative Medicine and Traditional Medicine

Across the generations, people have sought out cures for illnesses and relief from the suffering that they and/or others experience. In Western society especially, a loose system of home remedies has been overtaken by the formal science and industry of medicine and its increasingly sophisticated medical technologies.

In Western societies, the essence of traditional medicine is that it is evidence-based. It relies on diagnostic methods and treatments that are scientifically proven to be effective. In 1992 the Australian Medical Association released this statement: “The AMA maintains that a medical practitioner should at all times practise methods based on sound scientific principles and accordingly does not recognise any exclusive dogma such as homeopathy, osteopathy, chiropractic or naturopathy.”

However, traditional medicine has not secured cures for many diseases and illnesses. People continue to seek cures for their maladies. They are willing to seek effective alternative medicine.

A quick scan through the Internet reveals that, beyond those mentioned by the AMA above, AM practices include: Traditional Chinese Medicine (Acupuncture, Chinese Herbalism), Dietary Medicine, Western Herbalism (herbal medications can be toxic), Massage Therapies (Kinesiology, Shiatsu, Reflexology, Reiki), Electro-Magnetic Therapies, Pranic

¹ Barry Williams of the Australian Skeptics Inc (www.skeptics.com.au) wrote earlier this year:

A basic understanding of the sciences will serve as intellectual insulation against the seductive but empty claims of New Agery, creation science, complementary medicine or the post-modernist notion that “all ideas have equal value.” These movements pose a threat to the intellectual health of our society, and the best antidote is a broad understanding of science, a wide range of interests and a healthy dose of scepticism.

² It should be an obvious matter, for example, that feuds between Christians over the merits or otherwise of particular AM practices do not fall into line at all with new life and love in Christ. See the last section of this presentation for areas of genuine concern.

Yoga Therapy, Aura Readers and Photographers, Aromatherapists, Spiritual Healers, Therapeutic Crystals, Healing by Transcendental Meditation, Iridology and Breatharianism.

The interest in alternative medicine has links also with anti-rational and pseudo-scientific beliefs such as Astrology, Numerology, Tarot Card readings³, Mediums using Ouija Boards and other means to communicate with the dead, Clairvoyance, Pyramidology, Rebirthing, and the Anti-Vaccination Movement.

Now, that's quite a mixture. However, in opposition to the relativistic spirit of our age, there is no implication here that each of these is of equal value in themselves or for their medicinal value.

For example, Iridology, the study of the iris of the eye (the coloured portion around the pupil) in order to diagnose disease, is based on the unproven assumption that every organ in the human body has a corresponding location within the iris and that one can determine whether an organ is healthy or diseased by examining the iris rather than the organ itself. Various studies (including an Australian one by DM Cockburn at the University of Melbourne in 1981) have shown the claims of iridology to be false. The iridologists were unable to perform any better than chance in regard to recognising disease, and failed to diagnose illnesses that were actually present.

Yet, frequently enough people report that chiropractic treatment (including acupressure treatment) has given a level of pain relief. It is also known that specific dietary measures remedy the medical condition called Phenylketonuria, while certain yoga relaxation techniques understandably have a positive health effect for many people suffering stress. Similarly, there can be a positive health effect from talking out one's problems ("getting it off your chest") and receiving forgiveness and encouragement as might happen in private conversation with a trusted friend, a psychiatrist, or a pastor.

Considering such information, traditional medicine is wise to remain receptive to new ideas, as is being demonstrated with the 1999 trial of acupuncture to relieve nausea of pregnancy which is under way at the Women's and Children's Hospital, Adelaide SA. To quote Professor Alastair MacLennan at the WCH: "We should keep an open mind – but not so open that our brains fall out."

That is to say, there should be no assumption that all AM practices are inherently misguided or even evil. But it is also not enough to say that the 'ends justify the means', that the mere achievement of some success by AM means there is sanction enough for any particular AM practice.

Herbal Medicine

An important aspect of AM these days is the wide promotion and use of many different herbal and 'natural' remedies. Distribution and sale of these pharmaceuticals is big business. They are the stock in trade of AM practitioners but many of them are now freely available in chemist shops, health shops and supermarkets⁴, making possible a 'do it yourself' and 'take your pick' approach to AM. Wide ranging and seemingly extravagant claims are made for many of these remedies, often accompanied by persuasive brochures. Anecdotal evidence suggests that people find many of these herbal preparations beneficial. The medical establishment remains rather skeptical, suggesting that the claims are largely

³ The media bear some responsibility for the promotion of anti-rational and pseudo-scientific myths, such as Astrology columns in the popular press, and TV programs like *The X-Files* that seek to sensationalise "unexplained mysteries".

⁴ It has become big business. For example, Alan Benoussan, head of the Research Unit for Complementary Medicine at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, "says that on the most recent estimates, Australians are spending almost twice as much on complementary medicines as on pharmaceuticals." (reported by Ali Gripper, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22/11/99, page 17).

unsubstantiated by scientific evidence. Certainly, the wise course for a Christian is to be cautious in using such remedies and to try to find factual information and evidence.

Worthy Considerations

God's command to humanity via Adam and Eve to "subdue [the earth] and have dominion over [creation]" (Gen. 1:28) is vast in scope, with investigation of, discovery about and care for the creation being significant aspects of it. This command describes something of the purpose of being truly human. It should be noted that God directed beings capable of hearing and responding to the command and to the Commander — that is, actual fulfilment of the command was to occur under God, as His vice-regents, in praise of and to honour the Lord. There is no hint of a 'Do-what-suits-you-'attitude. Self-focus was not part of the divine design of humanity. Rather, its joy, peace and health⁵ flowed from being entirely reliant upon and trusting of God.

As Genesis 3 records, a terrible change occurred in humanity — contentment in God alone and innocent life under Him were exchanged for grasping for oneself. Through this satanic initiation, in one horrible moment mortality and all its symptoms infiltrated creation. Idolatry was born, and thrived. The rebellion of the false gods against the one true God has not ceased on the earth.

It is expressed in a host of ways, a chief one being people dancing around the golden calf of their health. There are a variety of dance steps, one of the more common being to focus on the persona of an AM or a traditional medicine 'guru'. Trust is placed in the human healer and not The Healer, God Himself, and often only to gain for oneself.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that often enough people's pursuit of AM, when the well of traditional medicine's health solutions has dried up, is a means not to face the reality of their mortality. But what a medicine knowing God and His presence and promises and grace in Christ is! How wonderful to live knowing that this life is not all but rather that, because of Christ's righteous ministering through Calvary and Easter, people are no longer separate from God, even should death intrude.⁶

Therefore, Christians refuse to be drawn into treatments which espouse the New Age spirit, a spirit which amounts to the view: "Physician, heal yourself." They are aware, through the revealed Word of God and its correspondence to everyday reality, that God has established this world as an interconnecting unit — each creature has at least one given place in which to serve others or to be ministered to.⁷ It can be said that there is a legitimate place for AM and traditional medicine.

But how is their legitimacy determined?

Criteria to enable decision-making

Numerous criteria might be put forward, but the chief considerations include:

- Christians willingly hand themselves over, body and soul, to the Triune God, their Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, and to his will and ways in all things.

⁵ The English language does not have an all-encompassing word, unlike Hebrew, which would use the word "Shalom" at this point to express a person's life as being entirely and beneficially in order. Theological dictionaries can provide the reader with greater detail of this Hebrew word.

⁶ Cf Psalm 23; 121:1; Isaiah 53; Matthew 6; Romans 5 and 8; Hebrews 12:1-12; 1 Peter 1:3-9; Acts 16:25; 2 Timothy 4:6-8 et al.

⁷ Love is the constituent element of creation. Luther once wrote that this is seen in the fact that no fruit tree "bears fruit for itself, but it brings its fruits for others. In fact, no creature lives for himself or serves only himself except for man and the devil. The sun does not shine for itself, water does not flow for itself, etc. Certainly every creature serves the law of love" (*Luther's Works* Vol. 14, p 200). Cf 1 Corinthians 12.

- Love of one's neighbour — In basic terms, this has two sides to it: (i) Do no harm (cf Luther's explanation of the Eighth Commandment), and (ii) as St Paul summarizes and urges: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people ...".⁸
- Knowing (or at least attempting to find) a treatment's linkages — For example, someone might claim that Reiki has helped to heal in some way, but the need in Reiki for a medium connecting to spiritual powers beyond empirical reality gives Christians pause for thought.⁹ Or, people might say they feel better for using crystals, but the New Age dogma (influenced by Eastern mystic religions) of focussing on oneself is also clearly against God's will as regards in whom our trust and confidence lies.¹⁰
- Discrimination — Stemming from such knowledge and discernment is the importance of discrimination. This is vital for Christians before they become involved in AM and perhaps come under the influence of a particular practitioner. It is a fact, unfortunately, that the New Age Movement¹¹ in particular has found an affinity with a number of AM practices and uses them on the basis of a particular religious and philosophical foundation. This religious thinking is pantheistic and holds that the human spirit is one with a great cosmic spirit. Through enlightenment and various mind techniques, it is held that the power of the universal consciousness can flow into a person and this can result in holistic healing. AM practitioners with these kind of mystical beliefs see themselves as conduits for these cosmic forces so that they can flow into the patient and bring healing.

A good example of this kind of problem is the practice of yoga, adapted in the West from Hindu practices. 'Yoga' actually means 'yoke' or 'union'. It has the ultimate purpose of 'yoking' a person with universal spirit, whatever claims may be made in the West that yoga in itself is simply a relaxation technique. It should be borne in mind that the deeper aspects of yoga inevitably involve a person in pantheistic philosophy.

Christians are wise to be cautious as they consider becoming involved with AM which has such a philosophical base, because it is opposed to God and his Word. Discrimination is therefore highly important. Christians owe it to themselves to try to ascertain the religious stance of the AM practitioner, so that they can feel assured that what they are involved in is purely secular.

⁸ Galatians 6:2,10. Cf Philippians 2:3-5; 1 Corinthians 13:1-6.

⁹ St Paul's declaration in 1 Timothy 4:4,5 means also that the good things of creation may have healing properties, if applied according to the best medical knowledge, in keeping with biblical guidelines, in a spirit of thanksgiving and with prayer. But if powers of healing are thought to emanate from humans in their natural state – which is a fallen one – there is the very real danger that humans can become the channel of occult powers. Here the principle espoused by the Lord is helpful: "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16).

¹⁰ St John might not have had health issues and healing methods in mind when he directed his readers: "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). However, it remains good advice for life generally, for blind acceptance can locate one in false ideas and ideals. Nothing is to interrupt the connection which God has made with the believer. Cf also 1 Thessalonians 5:20-22.

¹¹ Among the many articles and books on the New Age Movement and/or its connections to AM, the following are worth consulting:

J. Gordon Melton, *New Age Encyclopedia*, (Gale Research Inc., Detroit, Michigan. 1990).

Larry Nichols and George Mather, *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religion and the Occult*, (Zondervan Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1993).

David Atkinson and David Field, *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois. 1995).

These editions are available for reference at the Lohe Memorial Library, Luther Seminary, 104 Jeffcott Street, North Adelaide.

- Truth, not dishonesty — Seek empirical evidence for the specific medicinal claims; acting on a lie might well have adverse health effects. A corresponding thought concerns the 'industry' of medicine. Human sinfulness includes a greed factor. Charlatans are still prowling around looking for easy 'prey'. Recent scams have included negative ion mats to release healing energies (at \$3000) that did not even release negative ions, over-the-telephone testing for AIDS and cancer, flexible body magnets for \$500 to relieve pain, and desktop live blood cell analysis to detect early liver cancer – that could of course be cured by \$1000s of liver tonic therapy.

However, we can affirm that as scientific investigation establishes and verifies the claims and benefits of particular AM practices then thanksgiving to God is appropriate for His provision of another gift which serves humanity.

Conclusion

This brief presentation has urged caution by Christians as regards AM practices, and reasonably so.

There is one last matter worth stating. It concerns the reason why Christians pray for and seek out solutions to health problems. The motivation in such prayer is not to be selfishly relieved of or to escape from something unwanted. The motivation is chiefly twofold: (i) Health is a gift from God through which people are enabled to enjoy their total life as given by God (eg, family relationships, arts and culture, sport, intellectual pursuits); and (ii) from such a divine gifting follows our responsibility to use that gift for the common good, especially that we Christians may take our place more fully and vigorously in the service of the Lord and the coming of His kingdom among people ... not gaining for self, but being freed to give until that great Day when the Lord sets all things right, forever, for those who love Him.

— Lutheran Church of Australia
Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions
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