



Science and Faith in the Second City Study Series

Session 4: Spirituality and Mental Health

In this talk Rev Prof John Swinton explores the interface between spirituality and science, particularly in relation to the science of mental health. Many would argue that spirituality and science are in opposition, although here John Swinton argues that they are two different ways of seeing the world and both are valid. In the first part of his talk he explores what we mean by the term 'spirituality' with a focus on how spirituality can make us see the world in a different way. He goes on to suggest, using the brain imaging studies of neuroscientist Andrew Newberg, that we are all 'hard-wired' for spiritual experiences.

Fundamental to his talk is the concept of relational consciousness – that is human beings are relationship seeking creatures, reaching out at a human level to each other and at a divine level towards God and that this relational consciousness is the basis for spirituality and religion. Building on the research of David Hay in Oxford, John Swinton shows how children have a natural sense of awe and wonder and at a young age are open to spiritual experiences. Sadly however, the approach we take in our educational system towards finding truth leads to a 'despiritualisation' of our children as they grow up. There two important outworkings of relational consciousness. First is theological and John shows how our understanding of being made in the image of God makes sense if this phrase is interpreted in terms of relationship. Further, an understanding of health in terms of the concept of shalom. Shalom means righteousness or a right relationship with God, creation and one another and it expands health beyond the remit of a medical understanding so that it is possible to make a distinction between being healed and being cured. Secondly, he draws attention to the paradox that as human beings we are relationship seeking creatures and yet our culture encourages us to live as individuals; he suggests that there is something wrong with our culture when it pushes us away from relational consciousness.

In the second part of the talk John Swinton describes what is known as the phenomenological approach to mental health challenges. This where there is a focus on a person's lived story rather than simply their 'medical' story. He uses the concept of and thick and thin descriptions of a person's mental health. A thin description is a clinical/scientific description, whereas a thick description reflects the full range of emotions and feelings associated with that condition. To illustrate this John Swinton describes a number of interviews with people who have severe mental health conditions and explores with them the impact of pharmacological interventions (a place where science and spirituality meet) on their spiritual well-being. The talk concludes with a discussion of healing through friendship and how relational consciousness comes to the fore in friendship.

John Swinton is Professor of practical theology and pastoral care at the University of Aberdeen. He is also ordained in the Church of Scotland. He worked as a nurse for 16 years in the fields of mental health and learning disabilities and later as a community mental health chaplain.

The main themes covered in this study are: the idea of spirituality; humans are 'hard-wired' for spiritual experiences; spirituality as relational consciousness; children's innate sense of spirituality; the phenomenological approach to mental health challenges – treating the whole person; the negative implications of a diagnosis; the role of friendship in meeting mental health challenges. These notes are intended for private or small group study. Please watch each video clip and then consider the associated study questions. In this study there are 39 minutes of video and so in order to give enough time for group discussion it may be necessary to either select a subset of questions or to split this study into two separate sessions. The video material for this study can be found on our website at <https://www.scienceandfaith.co.uk>

Study Questions

PART 1 – Relational Consciousness

Spirituality - What is it? What does it do?

Watch the video

John Swinton sidesteps a definition of spirituality and instead focuses on what spirituality *does*. He explains that it 'helps us to pay attention to the world in ways which we would not necessarily do' and 'a focus on spirituality helps us to pay a different kind of attention to the world'

- Explore in your group how helpful you find this approach to your own spirituality.

The concept of relational consciousness

Watch the next video

John suggests that our relational consciousness (our innate tendency to reach out at both a human level to one another and at a divine level towards God) is the basis for all spirituality and religion. Children are gifted with this natural sense of awe and wonder making them open to spiritual experiences, although our educational system tends to 'despiritualise' them as they get older.

- Discuss the idea of relational consciousness. Is it real? Is it something that becomes more apparent as we get older?
- Later in the talk John states that relational consciousness developed in humans because 'there is something there to relate to', implying a divine being. How helpful do you find this argument?
- Discuss John's view that 'there is something in our culture that pushes us away from relational consciousness (and spirituality)'

Organisational mental health (an optional digression)

Watch the next video

Discuss any ways in which you recognise this analysis of an organisation that you work for or have worked for.

- Is there anything you can do to address this problem in your context?

The implications of relational consciousness

Watch the next video

John uses the idea of relational consciousness to provide a very plausible interpretation of the idea of what it means to be made in the image of God.

He also presents a very interesting understanding of the meaning of health and healing.

- Discuss the distinction John makes between being healed and being cured.

PART 2 – Mental health Challenges

Thick and thin descriptions of mental health challenges

Watch the next video

John Swinton offers thick and thin descriptions of schizophrenia. A medical description indicates that it is ‘a brain disease.....’ and a whole-person description ‘...scientific proof that I was utterly worthless’. Both are entirely valid.

- How does this analysis change your view of mental health challenges?

Asking phenomenological questions about technological practices

Watch the next video

John discusses pharmacological interventions in the light of a thicker description of a person’s mental health challenges. He discusses the impact of medication on the lives of three different people with mental health challenges and shows how medication can play a spiritual role in their lives.

- What do you think about the statements that ‘taking pills impacts on your relationship with God’ and that ‘taking pills can enhance your spirituality’ ?

Identity

Watch the next video

Ponder the statements: ‘Diagnosis changes your identity’; ‘Taking medication has a profound impact on your personhood’.

- Do you have any experiences of the way in which you changed because you were ‘labelled/ given a diagnosis’ or given certain treatment?
- Empathise with the lady who was plunged into loneliness when she was healed. Have you ever had a similar experience of loss?

Healing through friendship

Watch the next video

John concludes with the observation that ‘If we are relational beings, members of society – then friendship is the place where relational consciousness comes to the fore’.

- To what extent do you agree that there is a huge amount of stigma, and with this alienation, associated with mental health challenges?
- Discuss the place of friendship in bringing healing to people with mental health challenges

The talk ‘My mental health and spirituality’ was given in Birmingham in September 2022 as part of the Christian apologetics series ‘Science and faith in the Second City’. You can watch the talk in its entirety on our website. The project was funded by a Scientists in Congregations grant from ECLAS, in Durham, and organised by ChaplaincyPlus. This written material is free to copy.