

Some Concerns about Holistic Medicine, Dr. Bernie Siegel, and New Age Occultism

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.

Introduction

According to the back cover of one of his books, Bernie S. Siegel, M.D. "practiced general and pediatric surgery in New Haven, Connecticut, until he retired in 1989." He is a proponent of what has come to be known as "holistic medicine." Holistic Medicine, sometimes spelled 'wholistic', is a movement in our society exploring the potential medical benefits of coupling emotional and spiritual techniques to established medical procedures in an attempt to treat the "whole" person: body, mind, and spirit. Holistic Medicine is also referred to as holistic healing or health, alternative medicine, and New Age medicine. The initial surge of popularity of the holistic health movement is due largely to the revival of occultism in Western society called the New Age Movement. Thus, it is fair to say that the beliefs and practices which characterize holistic medicine are occult.¹

In labeling holistic medicine as New Age or occult, I am not saying anything which any informed New Age or occult scholar would deny. As noted Shaman² and holistic medicine enthusiast Michael Harner says,

¹ It should be added that the holistic health landscape has changed somewhat since I first wrote about my concerns about Dr. Siegel. When the movement first began to gain in popularity, most of the enthusiasts happily embraced the label of New Age. But as the marketplace began to affect the movement, especially with the onset of the internet, it has become fashionable to label virtually any innovative, alternative, or "natural" approach to health care as holistic. In my estimation, this is largely a marketing technique. It is not unlike the phenomenon of the category of New Age Music eventually coming to embrace even evangelical Christian recording artists such as Phil Keaggy. Thus, one can find certain elements of the movement now days, which is to say one may find certain techniques to which the practitioner will attach the label 'holistic,' that may have very little in common with the occult world view I am criticizing here. The reader should not assume that I mean my analysis to apply to just anything that has the label 'holistic' attached to it. But as far as how the term was coined and the views of the pioneers of the movement, my analysis stands.

²According to Nevil Drury, Shamanism is a "technique of gaining trance consciousness, in which the medicine-man, healer, or sorcerer undertakes a journey of the soul to encounter the gods or spirits." (Nevil Drury, *Dictionary of Mysticism and the Occult* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985): q.v. "Shamanism."

The burgeoning field of holistic medicine shows a tremendous amount of experimentation involving the reinvention of many techniques long practices in shamanism [witchcraft or occultism], such as visualization, altered state of consciousness, aspects of psychoanalysis, hypnotherapy, meditation, positive attitude, stress-reduction, and mental and emotional expression of personal will for health and healing.³

The Problems with Holistic Medicine

I object to the beliefs and practices of Dr. Siegel as found in his books and interviews, including *Love, Medicine & Miracles* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986); *Peace, Love & Healing* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1989); *How to Live Between Office Visits* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993); and "The High Priest of Healing," *New Age Journal* (May/June, 1989): 91-92. The basis of my objections stems from my commitment to the Christian world view.⁴ I contend that holistic medicine is anti-biblical and anti-Christian.⁵

³Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman* (New York: Bantam New Age Books, 1980): 175. The case can easily be made that for the most part Shamanism is occult. No academic work on Shamanism or the occult that I know of would deny this. For primary research on Shamanism and occultism see, Nevil Drury, *Dictionary of Mysticism and the Occult* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985); Nevil Drury, *The Occult Experience: Magic in the New Age* (Garden City Park, New York: Avery Publishing Group, 1989); Shirley Nicholson, *Shamanism* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1988); and Jose Stevens and Lena Sedletzky Stevens, *Secrets of Shamanism: Tapping the Spirit Power Within You* (New York: Avon Books, 1988). Being occult, Shamanism stems from the same world view as witchcraft, a term much more familiar to Americans. For primary research on witchcraft see, Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Raymond Buckland, *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1990); Chas S. Clifton, ed. *Witchcraft Today, Book One: The Modern Craft Movement* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1992); and Starhawk, *The Spiral Staircase* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

⁴Of course, my contention that the occult world view is false assumes the truth of the Christian world view. I am not attempting here to prove the truth of the Christian world view, only that, if the Christian view of reality is true, then the occult view of reality (and hence, Bernie Siegel's view of reality) is not.

⁵In saying this, I am not denying that there may be beneficial physical aspects to the practice of holistic health techniques, albeit, most of the "evidence" of their benefits are anecdotal and not clinical.

Holistic Medicine is False View of Reality

Specifically, I maintain three objections to holistic medicine. First, holistic medicine is predicated upon a false view of reality. Bernie Siegel claims that "God resides in each of us."⁶

Again, Siegel says,

[T]here is an energy available to all of us that can be used for healing. You can label this God if you want to, but we are God also. . . . When you get to heaven you will be asked if you want to meet God, and if you say yes, you'll be asked how you want to be introduced. What will you answer? There is only one correct response. I hope you realize that you and God are one.⁷

Of course, according to the Bible this is not true. Rather, this is a fundamental doctrine of the occult. As occultist Nevill Drury explains,

Although occult beliefs and practices vary enormously . . . most philosophies of this type have a fundamental, underlying purpose: the achievement of new and heightened awareness. . . . the idea that man and woman can become as gods.⁸

Siegel also maintains a pantheistic view of reality.

All things become manifestations of God in a sense, including the surgeon and the therapy. They're all part of the same system, the same creation. And therefore all things by definition are God.⁹

It should be obvious that if the Christian view of reality is true, then Bernie Siegel's view of reality is not.¹⁰

Holistic Medicine Involves Occult Beliefs and Practices

⁶Bernie Siegel, *How to Live Between Office Visits* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993): 185.

⁷Siegel, *How to Live Between Office Visits*, p. 179.

⁸Nevil Drury, *The Occult Experience: Magic in the New Age* (Garden City Park, NY: Avery Publishing Group, 1989): 121.

⁹Siegel, *How to Live Between Office Visits*, p. 179.

¹⁰Important verses to repudiate Siegel's view of reality include Genesis 1:1; Numbers 23:19; Deuteronomy 32:39; Isaiah 43:10; 44:6; 45:5-6; and Romans 1:22-23.

My second objection to holistic medicine is that it can lead one into occult beliefs and practices. Bernie Siegel holds occult beliefs and advocates occult practices. For example, he says,

If you say to me, do I believe we live on in some other kind of energy after the body dies, yes [then I do believe in reincarnation]. I mean, there are just too many interesting things I see happening in terms of communication to me from people who have died.¹¹

Death is no barrier to this intuitive, spiritual consciousness. It continues after death, and it communicates between the dead and the living.¹²

With guidance and practice, meditation can lead to breathtaking experiences of cosmic at-oneness and enlightenment ...¹³

The healer's role is to guide people into self-forgiveness ... to get them to understand that they are not sinners and to provide a path to self-healing and self-love.¹⁴

There are a number obvious problems from a biblical perspective with his beliefs here, *viz.*, inner or spirit guides, reincarnation, meditation, necromancy, the denial that we are not sinners, and the doctrines of self-healing and self-love. Regarding reincarnation, Hebrew 9:27 tells us "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." Thus, according to the Bible reincarnation is not true.

Regarding meditation, though there is a sense in which Christians meditate, it is not the Eastern, mystical, or occult meditation which seeks union with the All, a belief common in Hinduism and Western occultism. Occultist Nevill Drury says,

Many people accept, for example, that meditation is ideal for treating stress-related forms of illness, and yet most of the available meditation techniques derive *from non-Christian religions*, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. There is also broad-based public support

¹¹Bernie Siegel, "The High Priest of Healing," *New Age Journal* (May/June, 1989): 91-92.

¹²Bernie Siegel, *Love, Medicine & Miracles* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986): 220.

¹³Siegel, *Love, Medicine & Miracles*, p. 149.

¹⁴Bernie Siegel, *Peace, Love & Healing* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989): 177.

for alternative medicine . . . Yet such approaches as these usually have a distinctly metaphysical base.¹⁵

Regarding necromancy, or communication with the dead, Deuteronomy 18:10-12 tells us,

There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you.

Regarding whether we are sinners, the Bible specifically proclaims that we as humans are indeed sinners. As Romans 3:23 tells us "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This doctrine is trumpeted throughout the Bible.

Lastly, regarding the notions that somehow we have within ourselves the resources for fulfillment, though this is an increasingly popular belief in our society, my contention is that it stems from the occult and is anti-biblical. As our noted occultist explains,

In all this, then, there is a belief that we have within ourselves the potential for our own growth and renewal. Transcendental meditation says this, Zen Buddhism says this, and the western occult tradition says it also.¹⁶

Not only is this belief characteristically occult, but it denies Second Corinthians 3:4-5 which says "And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God."¹⁷

Holistic Medicine Involves Demonic Entities

My third objection to holistic medicine is that it can open one up to demonic forces. It is my contention that the entities with which Bernie Siegel is in contact are demonic. Siegel claims,

¹⁵Drury, *The Occult Experience: Magic in the New Age*, p. 1-2, emphasis added.

¹⁶Drury, *The Occult Experience: Magic for a New Age*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁷In other places Siegel attributes the healing to God. But he must mean this attribution to be the same as attributing it to ourselves since he claims that we are God.

As I have opened myself to my patients' beliefs, I have received many messages from those who have died.¹⁸

I have not encountered anywhere where Siegel speculates as to the nature of his contacts from the dead beyond assuming that they are certain patients whom he has treated. Given the fact that these experiences of communication with "the dead," or "spirits," (or any number of other designations one finds throughout the occult) universally lead to an occult view of reality (which view of reality is decidedly anti-Biblical and consistent with the view of reality that the Bible ascribes to Satan), I can only conclude by the weight of circumstantial evidence that the source of communication is Satan.¹⁹

Besides communication with supposedly dead patients, Siegel has had an ongoing relationship with an "inner" guide that he encountered during meditation. Siegel says,

At one point they led us in a directed meditation to find and meet an inner guide. ... I sat down, closed my eyes, and followed directions. I didn't believe it would work, but if it did I expected to see Jesus or Moses. ... Instead I met George, a bearded, long-haired young man wearing an immaculate flowing white gown and a skullcap. ... I suppose you may call George a "meditatively released insight from my unconscious," or some such, if you must have an intellectual label for him. All I know is that he has been my invaluable companion ever since his first appearance.²⁰

It is my contention that quite possibly Bernie Siegel has made contact with a demonic entity here. The practice of using mind dynamics such as meditation to contact "inner" guides is replete within the occult. These entities are explained in various ways, including the suggestions that they are spirits of departed humans, angels, members of the spiritual hierarchy, or extra

¹⁸Siegel, *Love, Medicine & Miracles*, p. 220.

¹⁹Interestingly, in explaining his use of the term 'spirits' in his Shamanistic practice Michael Harner says, "[W]hen I speak of 'spirits,' it is because that is the way shamans talk within the system. To practice shamanism, it is unnecessary and even distracting to be preoccupied with achieving a scientific understanding of what 'spirits' may really represent and why shamanism works." (Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*, p. xxi.) To me, the exact nature of these "spirits" is the most salient question in this matter. It is not unlike the child who cares not about the identity of the stranger who offers her candy.

²⁰Siegel, *Love, Medicine & Miracles*, pp. 19-20.

terrestrials. An examination of the messages conveyed by these entities reveals a conspicuous pattern. Virtually without exception, these entities inculcate within humans an occult view of reality.

Conclusion

I found Dr. Bernie Siegel to be a very endearing personality who obviously cares deeply for his patients. I appreciate the emphasis of the holistic health movement that there is more to the human experience than the physical. But I fear that, however well intentioned, Dr. Siegel has stumbled onto the most malevolent realm of reality there is. I believe these examples demonstrate that the beliefs and practices of Dr. Bernie Siegel are occultic and not biblical.

Postscript: Real Holistic Healing

Much controversy has occurred recently regarding the conference on holistic healing featuring Bernie Siegel.²¹ To surface some important issues and defend an orthodox Christian perspective on Siegel's brand of holistic healing, some of us in the Christian community have attempted to focus on the points of disagreement and distinguish Siegel's religious philosophy from that of our own. During the midst of these discussions some have misunderstood an important element in our position. No one in our camp denies the importance of the spiritual in the healing process, nor are we claiming that a spiritual dimension to patient care is out of place in the context of modern medical therapy. Our position is that only an orthodox Christian approach to the spiritual realm is valid.

The term 'holistic medicine' refers to the attempt to address the needs of the whole person in the healing process; body, soul, and spirit. There is not much controversy regarding the domain of the body. This aspect is the major focus of medicine, and occupies the bulk of study

²¹ This postscript was written in 1994 after a holistic health conference at a local church in my home town of Tupelo, MS at which Dr. Siegel spoke.

time in medical school. It is characterized by a study of the principles of physical truths regarding the physical dimension of the patient for the purpose of effecting physical healing. The controversy rages regarding the domains of the soul or spirit. There is no way that the notions of spirit can be thought of other than in religious terms. By definition, spiritual techniques, claims, and experiences are religious techniques, claims, and experiences. Thus, if anyone engages in holistic medicine, he is applying a religion of some sort. It is our contention that Bernie Siegel is applying occultism or New Age religion.

Some may wonder why, if Siegel's techniques work, there could possibly be anything wrong with his holistic approach. Our contentions are several. First, it is controversial whether Siegel's New Age approach is even effective. Much of the evidence is anecdotal not clinical. Second, just because a particular spiritual technique effects physical healing does not mean that the technique is spiritually healthy. We believe this is one point often missed by our opponents. As far as the spiritual realm is concerned, the most important thing is whether the spiritual claims are true and whether the spiritual techniques result in a proper relationship with God. We believe that the reason this is missed by those in the New Age movement (as well as liberal Christianity) is that too many of them have a functional approach to religion.

By functional approach we mean this: Suppose someone said to you that your car was not a "true" car. Surely this claim would baffle you. What could he possibly mean by the notion of a "true" car? If the object you call a car provides the transportation you need then it is by definition a car. It is a car because it fulfills the function of a car. Notions of "true" versus "false" when discussing a car do not make sense. The only important thing is whether the object fulfills the functions we want out of a car. Thus, most of us have a functional definition of what a car is.

Tragically, many have a functional view of religion. They believe that if their religion fulfills certain functions that meet certain needs they believe they have, then their religion is a valid religion. For example, if their religion gives them peace of mind, a purpose for life, and happiness, then by definition it is a true religion. They would be baffled at the charge that their religion is false. Our contention, however, is that religion is more than something to give us peace of mind, a purpose for life, and happiness. It surely should do this, but there is something more. We believe that true religion must be grounded in reality; that it must make true claims about who we are as human beings, who God is, and how we relate to God. The religion that cannot truthfully answer these questions is not a true religion, not because it fails to give one some sort of peace of mind, but because it makes false claims about reality. In the long run, only the religion that is true, *i.e.*, that makes true claims about reality, will be able to provide real peace of mind, purpose for life, and happiness, and provide it for all eternity. Only then can it truly meet the needs of one's spirit.

What then, according to Christianity, are the needs of the spirit and how, according to Christianity, are those needs met? Mankind's most basic need is to know and relate to God. This is eternal life. (John 17:3) Because of sin mankind is estranged from God. (Isaiah 59:2) The just punishment for our sins is an eternal banishment from God in hell. (Luke 12:4-5; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; Revelation 21:15) The only way for us to avoid this punishment is for Jesus to take our punishment for us and for us to become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13) This happens when we believe the gospel, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. (John 20:30-31; Romans 4:3-8). If we trust God to save us on the basis of what Jesus did for us, then God will save us. (John 6:37; Acts 16:30-31) Being saved means that we have a relationship with God in this life and an eternal relationship with God in the next

life in heaven. (John 14:1-6; 1 Peter 1:3-4) Having entered into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, we embark on a pilgrimage of spiritual growth whereby we partake more and more the character of Jesus and the holiness of God. (1 John 2:6; Hebrews 12:10; 2 Peter 1:3-4) This growth is effected by a study of God's word, the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17), by applying the Bible to life's experiences (Hebrews 5:13-14), by trials and suffering (James 1:2-4; Roman 5:1-5), by relationships (Proverbs 27:17), and by God's discipline (Hebrews 12:3-11). The day will come when all who are saved, those who believe in Christ, will be resurrected from the dead and go to be with God in heaven for all eternity. (John 5:28-29; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Revelation 21:4; 22:5) All those who are not saved, those who do not believe in Christ, will be resurrected from the dead, but will be lost forever and banished from God in hell for all eternity. (John 5:29; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; Revelation 21:15)

The problem with the New Age approach to holistic healing is that the apparent answers it gives are only a shadow, not a reality. If Christianity is true, then the religion of Bernie Siegel is spiritually fatal, if not physically fatal. Thus, when we object to "holistic healing" we are not objecting to having a spiritual dimension to patient care. We are maintaining that only Christianity can truly meet the needs of one's spirit. This is real holistic healing.