



A Response to Energy based Theories and Therapies

Nurses Christian Fellowship and the *Journal of Christian Nursing* frequently receive inquiries about energy based alternative therapies such as therapeutic touch, Reiki, crystal therapy, acupuncture, acupressure, and other forms of oriental medicine. Many of these approaches are advocated by proponents of the “New Paradigm” in nursing.¹ The issues involved are complex and often illusive, but we believe that we must take a stand. We respond, not out of fear of the unknown, but out of a desire to be faithful to God. Hence, our response is primarily a theological perspective, but also based on scientific, ethical and practical concerns.

The following response was developed in collaboration with an ad hoc task force of experts who have personally investigated energy based alternative therapies, and tried to do so with an open mind. Various task force members have conducted an extensive review of the literature, attended continuing education workshops, and dialogued with practitioners. Some have taken graduate courses in Eastern religions, visited oriental medicine facilities in China, observed various energy based therapies being performed, and are in continuing discussion with nurses in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, India, Pakistan, Uganda and other countries where these therapies have been traditionally practiced.

First, we must affirm many of the concerns and goals of advocates of these theories and therapies, including:

- the need for a more personal approach to health care, including the use of touch,
- a holistic view of the person,
- a recognition of the reality of human suffering,
- an affirmation of the spiritual and unseen,
- the importance of faith and prayer,
- a humility in recognizing that there may be forms of physical energy that we cannot yet measure,
- a rejection of *scientism*, which reduces all reality to physical/material phenomena.

Second, we also affirm good science and the appropriate use of technology, viewing them as gifts from God to be used for the benefit of creation according to God’s direction in Scripture. The methods of science give us knowledge of the physical aspects of creation. However, the personal, spiritual, aspects of creation are veiled, and while manifested in the physical world, are not explained by science. The meaning of the personal and spiritual are seen only in the context of a larger worldview.

The Christian worldview is neither the mechanistic/dualistic understanding of scientism, nor the impersonal energy field of the New Paradigm, but is characterized by personal relationship with God and other people.

As Christians we confess our understanding of God as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. He creates and sustains all things by his word alone.² He is the Sovereign Lord of the Universe who loves and cares for us and became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ.³ He is personal and enters into human history.⁴ He requires our obedience and faithfulness, and cannot be manipulated or controlled.⁵

We view the person as a physically, psychosocially and spiritually integrated being,⁶ created to live in dynamic personal relationship with God, self and others.⁷ The person is created in the image of God as a thinking, feeling, willing being with the responsibility to care for, and not exploit, creation.⁸ However, all persons are affected by sin and cannot live up to the full potential God intended.⁹

Through the salvation of Jesus Christ, God brings persons into *shalom* the whole person dwelling at peace in community with God, other people and the environment.¹⁰ Ultimate health is characterized by *shalom*.¹¹ It is to that end that Christian nurses work in cooperation with God.¹²

The biblical understanding of *salvation* is a holistic concept.¹³ The Greek term *sozo*, means both health and salvation. The two are inseparable. Both result from the restoration of the person to *shalom* with God and others.¹⁴ However, in this life suffering will never be completely overcome.¹⁵ We live in the hope of a new heaven and new earth where sorrow and death will be no more.¹⁶

The Christian tradition holds a rich treasure in health and healing. The Bible and church practices point us to the means of grace and the hope of glory, equipping us for the work of healing: the sacraments,¹⁷ prayer,¹⁸ anointing with oil,¹⁹ the laying on of hands²⁰, the gifts of the Spirit,²¹ and the mutual encouragement of believers.²² Each of these acts directs us to God as the source of healing and hope. Scripture also gives us guidelines for living that promote physical, emotional and spiritual health, and prevent disease.²³

In contrast, the underlying worldview of energy based therapies is a theory of impersonal energy that can be manipulated and controlled.²⁴ The theory is drawn from various sources in Eastern philosophy and traditional religions, including shamanism, native American spirituality, and Wicca.²⁵ In many of these understandings of reality the impersonal energy takes on personality and related practices become manipulation of spirits. In cultures where this worldview has predominated, energy based therapies have proliferated. While sometimes providing short term relief from some forms of illness, the overall effect of these beliefs and therapies has been a sense of fear and bondage.²⁶ Christians who were converted out of these belief systems are usually the most adamant against practicing energy based therapies.

In our own culture, scientism has blinded us to the reality of the spiritual world. Our African and Asian brothers and sisters in Christ have sternly warned us about the serious potential for demonic involvement in energy based therapies. Many long term meditators and deeply entrenched energy based therapists unabashedly state that they are entering the "demonic realm" in meditation,²⁷ or that their therapies were "spirit channeled."²⁸

The Bible affirms that the personal spiritual world is real.²⁹ Spiritual beings are not merely psychological projections. Spiritual energy is always personal, and associated with beings who have intelligence and intentions toward us.³⁰ Angels are God's servants under his authority.³¹ God sometimes directs them to protect and shelter his people.³² Evil spirits, or demons, are beings whose intention is to deceive us concerning the truth of God and to control us, ultimately destroying us. Because God is the commander of his angels, we are not to worship them or directly seek their assistance.³³ Because demons deceive and destroy, and because they are spiritually more powerful and crafty than humans, we are to have no dealings with them.³⁴ Christians are protected from their power by being in Christ Jesus.³⁵ God has opened the only way for spiritual life through Jesus Christ.³⁶ All prayer is to be directed to God, through Jesus Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit.³⁷

Although some Christians do advocate energy based theories and/or practice these therapies with good intentions, they do so at their own peril. This critique should in no way be interpreted as questioning the integrity, motives, or Christian commitment of those who advocate energy based therapies. However, we do want to challenge the ideas and practices.

A Christian worldview cannot simply be superimposed on an energy based worldview by renaming the source of power. The entire understanding of reality differs in these worldviews. Hence, calling this energy "the Holy Spirit," "the breath of God," or "God" is inappropriate. God cannot be controlled or manipulated. God is not "One" with the universe. We cannot become one with God, nor can we become gods or goddesses. When God enters the human heart it is always in the form of a personal relationship, not a merging with the forces of the universe.³⁸

The Christian church does have a rich mystical tradition, which became suppressed during the Enlightenment and the rise of empiricism. We affirm that there is much in this tradition that should be restored and enjoyed. Mysticism unchecked, however, frequently leads to serious heresy and corruption in the church, and blurs the uniqueness of the Christian gospel. Psychologist Elizabeth Hillstrom points out that mystical writers from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi to Christian mystics like St. John of the Cross all warn about the dangers of "madness, demonic deception or possession for those who venture into the mystical path."³⁹ Richard Foster describes the goal of true Christian mysticism:

In meditative prayer there is no loss of identity, no merging with the cosmic consciousness, no fanciful astral travel. Rather, we are called to life transforming obedience because we have encountered the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Christ is truly present among us to heal us, forgive us, to change us, to empower us.⁴⁰

The Bible is the central reference point in Christian mysticism. The mystical experience must always be tested by the Scriptures, not the other way around. When mysticism moves beyond biblical limits, it ceases to be Christian, even when Christian terminology is retained.

From a scientific perspective, proponents of energy based therapies vacillate between two extremes. Some advocates dismiss science entirely and claim the effectiveness of these therapies through anecdotal evidence. Others have attempted to use both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Results, however, remain inconclusive.⁴¹ Some have attempted to blend modern physics with Eastern mysticism⁴² but have made quantum leaps in logic and reality in the process.⁴³

In many situations energy based therapies do appear to work. However, efficacy alone does not merit their use. Real spiritual powers may be involved, powers that oppose our Lord Jesus Christ. Positive results of some energy based therapies can be explained within the Christian worldview (e.g., touch, presence, and a sense of hope can release brain chemicals and promote healing). Some practices, such as exercise and good nutrition, promote health but need not be explained by an energy based worldview. On the other hand, some research has indicated that the long term effects of meditative states may, in fact, be physically and psychologically harmful.⁴⁴

Furthermore, when energy based therapies are used without the patient's consent, a clear violation of professional ethics occurs.⁴⁵ The ethical issues remain when the patient consents, but without being fully informed about the rationale or worldview behind the procedure.

Practically speaking, while the nursing goals set by theorists and practitioners based on an energy worldview may seem reasonable to the nurse, they may not be what the patient is seeking. Most people enter the health care system in order to find cure or relief from illness. Nurse educator Barbara Stevens Barnum further extends this concern to the employing agency. She states, "This is not to denigrate these New Age theories of nursing, but simply to point out that they may be at odds with the goals and functions of most institutions that employ nurses."⁴⁶

Energy based theories and therapies continue to gain adherents in nursing. Experience is a persuasive teacher. Those who have become convinced of the value of energy based therapies through their own participation in them will probably not be swayed by these arguments.

However, because we believe there are major theological, ethical and practical issues at stake, the undersigned will continue to hold firm in our stand. We cannot present energy based theories or therapies as a feasible alternative for Christian nursing.

Where do we go from here? First, we must continue the dialogue, seeking to hear one another carefully and clearly. Second, we must explore and appreciate the riches we have in Christ for health and healing. It is time to restore a Christian theoretical foundation to nursing. To do so, we must know what we believe, and consider the practical implications of biblical faith. We invite you to join in the process.

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¹ For example, see Barbara Stevens Barnum, *Spirituality in Nursing: From Traditional to New Age* (New York: Springer Publication, 1996), Chapter 5, "Spirituality and the Emerging Paradigm."

² Gen 1:2; Jn 1:1-3; Heb 1:3

³ Jn 1:14; Col 1:15-20

⁴ Jer 31:33-34; Heb 1:1-2

⁵ Job 38:4ff; Is 43:13

⁶ Ps 16:9, 32:3-4; 1 Thes 5:23

⁷ Is 30:15; Jn 10:27, 13:34

⁸ Gen 1:27-28

⁹ Rom 3:23

¹⁰ Is 65:13-25; Jn 3:16

¹¹ Lk 4:18-19 (cf Is 60-62); Phil 4:6-7

¹² Is 52:7; 1 Jn 3:16-18

¹³ 1 Thes 5:23

¹⁴ For example, see Mk 5:23, 6:56, 10:52; Lk 8:48-50, 17:19, 18:42; Acts 4:9, 14:9; Jas 5:15

¹⁵ Rom 5:3-5, 8:16-25; 2 Cor 4:16-18

¹⁶ Rev 21:2-5

¹⁷ Mt 28:19, 26:26-29

¹⁸ Jas 5:13

¹⁹ Jas 5:14-15

²⁰ The laying on of hands first appears in the Old Testament, where it was commonly used to confer a blessing (see Gen 48:14). In the New Testament the laying on of hands by anyone except Jesus (e.g. Mk 5:23, 6:5; Lk 13:13) was used primarily for the ordination of church leaders or in connection with the gift of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 6:5-6, 8:18, 13:3, 19:6; 1 Tim 1:18, 4:14, 5:22). Acts 28:8 is one exception, where Paul uses the laying on of hands for healing. In Acts

4:30 the disciples pray assuming that God is stretching forth *his* hand to heal. The practice has continued throughout church history and been incorporated into the liturgies of many Christian traditions. The relationship of the person laying on hands is one of petitioner, not as a channeler or manipulator.

²¹ Rom 16:2-8; 1 Cor 12:1-11

²² Heb 10:23-25

²³ For example, the Old Testament sanitary code in Lev 11-15, and numerous references in the New Testament to the relationship between health, faith and human relationships (e.g., Lk 4:40, 5:31; Acts 5:15; 1 Cor 11:30; 1 Tim 5:23; Jas 5:14).

²⁴ Dora Kunz and Erik Peper, "Fields and Their Clinical Implications," in Dora Kunz, *Spiritual Aspects of the Health Arts* (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1985), pp. 213-261. Also see Rochelle B. Mackey, "Discover the Healing Power of Therapeutic Touch," *American Journal of Nursing*, (95)4, April 1995, pp. 27-31.

²⁵ Barbara Blattner, *Holistic Nursing* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1981), pp. 7-16. Lynn Keegan, *The Nurse as Healer* (Albany: Delmar Publishers, Inc., 1994), pp. 4-6.

²⁶ See Vishal Mangalwadi, *When the New Age Gets Old* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

²⁷ See for example, YUASA Yasuo, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 215.

²⁸ Barnum, *op. cit.*, p. 67-68.

²⁹ Eph 6:12

³⁰ For example Lk 22:31; 1 Peter 5:8-9; Jas 4:7

³¹ Col 1:16; Heb 1:14

³² Gen 19:15; 1 Kgs 19:5-7; Mt 4:6; Lk 1:30, 4:10, 22:43

³³ Col 2:18

³⁴ 1 Cor 10:20-21; 2 Cor 2:11; 1 Tim 4:1

³⁵ Mt 28:18; Jn 8:31-32; Acts 19:11-20; Eph 6:11

³⁶ Mt 11:27; Jn 14:6

³⁷ Mt 6:9-13; Jn 16:23-24; Rom 8:26

³⁸ Jn 14:23; Col 1:13-20; Heb 2:14-15

³⁹ Elizabeth L. Hillstrom, *Testing the Spirits* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 132.

⁴⁰ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1992), p. 149.

⁴¹ Sharon Fish, "Therapeutic Touch: Can We Trust the Data?" *Journal of Christian Nursing*, 10(3), Summer 1993, pp. 6-7.

⁴² One of the most-quoted is Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 1975)

⁴³ Noble Prize-winning physicist Leon Lederman, in *The God Particle* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing, 1993), provides an entertaining exposé in the chapter on "The Dancing Moo-Shu Masters," pp. 189-198.

⁴⁴ Hillstrom, *op. cit.*, p. 118-119.

⁴⁵ In Rochelle B. Mackey's 1995 article "Discover the Healing Power of Therapeutic Touch," *AJN*, 95(4), p. 29, she describes an incident where she performed therapeutic touch on an unconscious patient. Many nurses who practice therapeutic touch have told me that they do not usually inform patients, but practice the technique on patients who are asleep or unconscious.

⁴⁶ Barbara Stevens Barnum, *Spirituality in Nursing* (New York: Springer, 1996), p. 81.

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