

# *Editorial*

## Spirituality, health and science – A roadmap to integration from the desk of the new editor\*

*Harald Walach*

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On a wonderful sunny Pentecost weekend in June 2006 in Cumbria, Steve Wright and I formally agreed that I would take over the editorship of *Spirituality and Health International*. We – that is me and my research group in Northampton – had just arrived in the UK, coming from Freiburg University Hospital in Germany. We did not have many contacts in the field and although spirituality and health have been subject areas of great interest to me for quite some while, I kept that interest rather hidden and someone had to look closely to discover it. The reason for my being rather quiet was not that I did not want to come out of the closet, but our situation in Freiburg University Hospital had been, shall we say, politically delicate. I had founded one of the few and prime-time research groups dealing with complementary and alternative medicine, not a subject held in particularly

high esteem in one of the largest academic hospitals in Germany, especially as we were dealing with topics that, for some, would feature under the heading of scientific pornography, such as homeopathy (Walach, 2003; Walach et al., 1997; Walach, Köster et al., 2001), spiritual healing (Walach, Bösch et al., 2002; Wiesendanger et al., 2001), Bach flowers (Walach, Rilling, & Engelke, 2001), among others. The closest point of contact with mainstream science we ever had was work on the placebo effect (Walach & Jonas, 2004; Walach, Schmidt et al., 2002) or on methodology (Walach, Falkenberg et al., 2006).

In recent times the newly arisen interest in mindfulness and its integration gave us a chance to delve more deeply into one of my original interests: the connection between meditation, spirituality and health. We

\*University of Northampton, School of Social Sciences and Samueli Institute for Information Biology

conducted the first, albeit small, evaluation study of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in Germany (Majumdar et al., 2002), and a meta-analysis (Grossman et al., 2004), constructed a mindfulness questionnaire (Walach, Buchheld et al., 2006), and are currently running a large clinical trial of MBSR in fibromyalgia patients.

Another of our attempts at raising the issue of spirituality, apart from some theoretical ones (Walach, 2005; Walach and Reich, 2005), had been the construction of a questionnaire on exceptional human experiences. Niko Kohls, who had been a student of mine in Freiburg, and I constructed the questionnaire together and ran a series of evaluation and validation cycles until we finally offered the last version to Steve for publication. Readers of this journal who have been following closely will have found it in one of the 2006 issues (Kohls and Walach, 2006).

Publication of this questionnaire coincided with our moving to the UK following an offer to me of a position as a research professor in Northampton. This not only alleviated some of the burden associated with funding my own position but also allowed me to fund more positions with my research money. This funding is coming from the Samuelli Institute, a US-based charity that is dedicated to scientifically researching the processes leading to healing and introducing a change in the healthcare system honouring an integrative and holistic view of health and healing (<http://www.siib.org>). I have been running the European operations of the Samuelli Institute for more than five years now and am responsible for the Institute's agenda on 'Spirituality, Healing and the Mind', driving that agenda, networking, doing research and developing the field.

My move to the UK was also a deliberate attempt to move further into the field of Spirituality and Health, and hence Steve's

offer was an extraordinary coincidence or synchronicity in Jung's phraseology (which is a bit misplaced, I find), where my inner development was met by a striking parallel coming from outside that made a lot of sense. Hence, I did not have to take very long to ponder on Steve's offer. I had to clarify the situation with my group, because it is a decision that involves us all. I also had to discuss it with Karger publishers in Freiburg who produce the German-based and internationally operating *Journal Research in Complementary Medicine* (<http://www.karger.com/fok>), which I have been editing for a while now and will continue to do. I found this to be a timely and extremely well-fitting move to take over *SHI* from Steve.

Before moving on to some glimpses into the future, it is time to pause and thank Steve for his single-handed efforts that have established a fine outlet for scholarly work and the only one in the field that is actually dealing with the interface between spirituality and health explicitly from a non-denominational perspective. I am grateful, honoured and moved to have the chance to take Steve's child into a new phase, as it were. It reminds me of children leaving home for school. A new phase starts, and the kids bring to school what the parents have planted in them. The teacher can only teach them in so far as their previous experience, their family background and psychological make-up is supportive of this new experience. In the same sense, Steve has planted the seed, worked the fields and created context and meaning within which the journal has thrived and is going to thrive further.

Now, what is this new phase going to be? What will the challenges and tasks be? How are we going to face them? Let me offer you some thoughts, and invite you to participate in the process, by sending correspondence and ideas and furthering discussion (and bear with me during the transition, when things

might not be running as smoothly as they should do).

1. The field is ripe. The topic of spirituality and health is starting to gain momentum and scientific reputability. The rise in interest in mindfulness-based interventions is one sign. The fact that spirituality is being made a topic of conferences, of special interest issues of journals, is being discussed as an important domain in the quality of life literature, these are all clear signs of the beginning of a new academic culture, and not just counter- or subculture. Not that I would find sub- or counter-culture terrible. On the contrary: they are often important in establishing new fields. But eventually it is where the power lies that the influential decisions are made. And in that sense it is more important to link up with the mainstream culture than to hold on to a cosy nest in counter-culture. I would thus expect that the first and most important step is now to bring the field round the corner to meet with the big guys from mainstream culture who may have an interest in the field and are willing to come out of the closet. I feel that an important step is to increase the momentum of a scientific outlet and correspondingly this is my aim for *SHI*.
2. There are a few ways of achieving that. One is to make the journal a listed outlet that is abstracted by the major services, such as Embase, Medline, Psychinfo, Cinahl, etc. Only information that people can see and find is information that is going to make a difference. In order to achieve that we shall use several means:
  - Widening our international advisory board to include more members from more countries will help us gain credibility, provide us with papers and expertise, as well as help us market and spread the word. Expect to hear more about this.
  - In addition to the advisory board, a new editorial board will help steer and shape the policy of the journal and add to its credibility. Again, you will hear more in the next issue.
  - With the help of our boards we shall attract not only good papers but important papers that will be hard to ignore and thus have a long half-life and get cited. Such papers typically are authoritative reviews, important conceptual pieces or good empirical research.
3. This should help us get a listing and hence also become a more interesting outlet for authors, as well as, and most importantly, a journal not only worthwhile but also necessary to have for our readers, both individually and institutionally. If successful, this strategy should help us to set a circle in motion that establishes this journal as a major focal point for the field.
4. What is needed in the field is a voice independent of religious or other allegiances (but certainly open to them all), and an outlet authors can turn to when they want to be heard with research that is important for the interaction between spirituality and health as well as a journal readers know is worthwhile to read because it contains vital information. It will definitely be non-denominational and with a broad scope. It even has to be iconoclastic at times, meaning not stopping in front of any supposedly holy taboo. One of my favourite sayings in that respect is the Zen Koan: 'What is the dharma, the true teaching?' 'Only vastness. Nothing holy.'
5. Our effort has to be linked with the mainstream culture of science, if it is to have any impact at all and if it is to be worthwhile. Science, I usually tell my students, is 80% hypnotherapy and social

communication, and 20% (at the most) genuine work, action and new findings. Once that view of science is understood – and this is notably quite a different view from those ice-age positivist ideas that many people still have and as different from real science as a TV soap is from real life – one can start and be pragmatic instead of dogmatic. There are two major forces, if I am not mistaken, that influence our Western culture hugely: Science and Hollywood. Science produces the raw material that Hollywood uses for forging dreams (and vice versa), world-views, implicit philosophies about the world that then become everyday culture. Religion, at least in Europe, has long lost out. The fight that Dawkins and others are fighting is actually a fight already won (the hilarious thing is that the likes of Dawkins have not even realized that they have already won!). It is figures, facts and physics that produce realities, not faith systems, creeds, beliefs or woolly religious feelings. The Iraq war was not justified on grounds of faith, doctrine and values, as the political rhetoric would have had us believe, but on supposedly scientific grounds. The iconographic proof for that statement is Colin Powell before the UN Security Council. He was not holding a bible or a copy of Adam Smith, but a glass vial. Whatever this vial supposedly contained, it was an iconography of scientific credibility. To make a U-turn back to our journal: It is not high-level abstract concepts (alone) that move our culture. It is hard-nosed scientific findings and their emotional translation into everyday life.

6. This does not mean that spirituality has to go quantitative, down the path of medical drug licensing to get FDA or EMEA approval for an investigative drug, or become simple and pragmatic, producing historically blind and conceptually silly research. Not at all, and rather to the

contrary. But it does mean that scientific research in the field has to aim at bringing leverage to bear on the mainstream in order to establish an important dialogue between spirituality and science. Here is an example to clarify what I mean.

Transpersonal psychology, for instance, a field which I have followed closely for a long time and which I have been helping establish as an academic discipline in Germany and now here in the UK (<http://www.northampton.ac.uk/tp1>), has been extant for more than 30 years. It has not made it into a single 'real' academic psychology department in the United States, let alone in Central Europe. In the UK – due to its more dynamic and somewhat market-oriented culture compared with the Continent – it has made its way into at least two departments: that at John Moores University Liverpool (JMU) and our own in Northampton. Sure, there is a huge counterculture movement: Ken Wilber has seeded fan circles all over the globe and has written more pages than the average reader would read in a lifetime and the academic reader would certainly not read due to their being academically mostly irrelevant. The German Transpersonal Conferences regularly attract more than 800 participants and more would come, if the venue would hold them. The *German Transpersonal Psychology Journal* is subscribed to by more than 1000 readers – probably more than any single academic German-language journal. Yet hardly anybody from academe would pay attention to what is written in it, partly because not everything is really all that interesting, of course, but partly because it is not considered 'scientific', whatever that means. The *American Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* has been around since 1967, and is listed in Psychinfo and other abstracting services. But is it a relevant publication?

Probably not. Try and find out which university libraries hold copies. In the UK it will probably not be many, Northampton and JMU being among the few. In Germany it used to be only Freiburg.

7. So what is it that makes something scientific or not? What is it that makes something have an impact or not? Is it just quality? Is it living up to a standard? Is it following declared rules? I would say yes and no. Science is a social process. It has mostly implicit rules. The ones that are explicit are known and boring, and they are subject to change. The implicit rules are the important ones. They are much harder to grasp and resistant to change. Here are a few examples.

One important implicit rule is: Before you criticize, really understand what you are criticizing. A lot of the criticism coming from Transpersonal Psychology, for instance, would be much more effective if it were more knowledgeable, more historically literate, more conceptually sound, and more socially connected. Criticism that is a one-man show in the service of narcissistic gratification can hardly be expected to go down well.

Another important rule: Before you decide to break away, try and find points of contact. An excellent example of that strategy is Jon Kabat-Zinn's development of his MBSR training. He did not just set up his own show (although he also did that) declaring it a new invention. He linked it to the strong tide of behavioural medicine. He seasoned mindfulness meditation with up-to-date knowledge about stress and health. He submitted his training to rigid evaluation and efficacy testing, speaking the language of his peers in doing so. And thus he achieved acceptance.

Hence: Speak the language of those you wish would listen to your message. It would

not be a good idea to travel to France and convert the French to the English way of life by giving a speech in English. In the same vein, you don't want to tell scientists who have done mechanistic and rather materialistic types of research that what they have done so far is all very nice but rather stupid and ill-defined (although it might be true!). You would want to look for points of contact between their work and your message. And this point of contact could be a certain methodology, a common interest, and most likely they are going to listen to you if you can offer a solution to a problem they have and cannot solve using their own resources. If we are being perceived as actually helpful and useful, it is more likely that spirituality is going to be considered an important field. An interesting example is the parlance around the placebo effect. While this has been used as a weapon against any kind of complementary medicine and used to be a no-go subject, it is meanwhile a topic with a huge bridging potential between complementary medicine and orthodox approaches. Research into it is funded by the NIH and large and important studies are being published. So sometimes a creative move of reframing does the job without you ever having to distort your creed, your intentions or your methodology. Just don't write 'spirit' on the label on the bottle, say 'alcohol'. It's the same. It's easy. And it does not offend.

Another good one is: Find out where the biggest problem is and point out how the problem arises either from a shortcoming in theorizing that you can amend or from an oversight in variables that you offer to introduce. A good example is resilience and self-healing, for instance in cancer treatments or in coping with stress. Don't say: 'Our culture is so terrible. It produces all these nasty stress syndromes, and only a conversion to God's own religion in God's own country following God's own rules will remedy the

situation.’ Say instead: ‘Well, stress is an omnipresent problem. It actually arises out of a deficit in coping mechanisms. And here is how we can help out: Use MBSR, TM, meditation, Chi Gong, rosary prayer – insert your favourite here – and apply it. And here is the data in support of this suggestion: insert your data.

The latter is the approach we would like to see in the future: pragmatic, non-dogmatic, interesting data, thoughtful and well-informed conceptual and theoretical papers. This we would wish to be topped by a rather thick icing of solid reviews that crosslink several areas and thus inspire new creative ideas as well as knowledge and overview of complex areas that are too complex for individuals to compact for themselves.

Science is like an amoebic cell. If such a cell moves, it starts to become fuzzy at the fringes first. The core remains stable all the way through. It is absolutely silly, and a waste of time and effort, to attack the core of science or whatever one sees as the core. But it is easy to observe the fringes becoming fuzzy and mobile. Then pick up on this motion, link to it and suddenly you are part of the movement and can steer it yourself, or at least you can contribute to its future direction.

Hence, one of my firmest beliefs – not a very holy one, but a belief frequently proven true – is that without a good and solid connection to what happens in mainstream science, every attempt to establish a counter- or complementary culture is doomed to failure. It is also one of my firm beliefs – a bit holier and perhaps difficult to sway – that the move of history, the process of life and collective evolution that is also visible in science has some truth to it, eventually. Sometimes it is only through tragedy that we reach this truth. At times it can also be funny. Hence I think, even if I dislike a lot of what is going on in mainstream scientific culture,

that it is ultimately a good and important process and the only process that is uniting cultures, times and political systems in a more or less peaceful attempt at discovering the make-up of our world. Everything else has led to war: religion, economy, political systems.

As it happens, another, even firmer belief of mine is that spirituality is part of that make-up of our world. And when I say belief, I don’t mean sentences of a creed that you learn and have to say in order to end up on the right side of the division line when it comes to judgment day and the final pay slips are distributed. I mean a higher order concept coming out of my own experience. So, spirituality, I believe, is part of the make-up of this world and of us humans. In similar ways to sex not having been a public topic at the beginning of the twentieth century – everybody did it, everybody suffered, some had pleasure, but it was not discussed publicly and scientifically – spirituality is a taboo topic at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And similar to what happened at the beginning of the twentieth century we need to bring spirituality into the focus of science proper – psychology, medicine, neuroscience – and the humanities as well, of course.

Our journal could be a major vehicle for that process. This would be my self-declared remit, and I invite you all to join. The editorial and advisory board you will be hearing more about in the next issue. The readers, who I would invite to help with feedback and to return the questionnaire: Let us know what you want, what you value, what you can do away with, what you hate. Before you cancel your subscription, tell us how you want us to improve and give us a chance. Tell others about the journal, tell your library, bully your librarian, give it as a gift to your grandma for her eightieth birthday . . . Potential authors: Send us your

manuscripts. And send us the good ones, not the file-drawer ones that nobody wanted. Give of your best. And we will return our best: Good and speedy reviews by two competent reviewers who are not set to bully you and make your life difficult but to ascertain quality in a rigorous yet friendly peer review system. Nothing, except editorials and the research digest and other editorial material, will be published without solid review. To everyone: Help shape the journal. Although I am the editor-in-chief, I would see my role as facilitator and inspirer. I am not the motor, I am the one who steers and operates the brake when necessary. You are the motor, and the journal is the collective undertaking of authors, readers, editors and advisers, and not least of those who take note, quote material from it and use the work in a cross-fertilizing process even if they are not subscribing to the

journal. They are the ones that matter, too, because they shape the reputation of the journal. In a single phrase: this journal is meant to serve, you, the readers, the authors, the wider field, the topic of Spirituality and Health, towards an integration into and dialogue with science.

**Harald Walach**, University of Northampton, School of Social Sciences, Psychology Division and Samuelli Institute for Information Biology, European Office, Boughton Green Road, Northampton NN2 7AL, UK  
Tel. (+44) (0)1604-892952; fax (+44) (0)1604-722067  
harald.walach@northampton.ac.uk

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