

**CHAPTER VIII: IS SPIRITUALITY GOOD FOR HEALTH? HISTORY
DECIDES**

So where does this leave us? How has history--which I promised was going to be very, very helpful to us--how has it been helpful to us, helpful to our ability to think about the question of whether spirituality is good for our health, think about it better than we otherwise would have? Well, I have five thoughts or sort of answers to this question which I want to lay out for you relatively quickly and then follow with just a final thought to wrap up. Here's the first of my five thoughts. All of these in a sense were already implied, but I want to now underscore why they matter. Okay, the first is that we're not dealing here with a single enterprise. We're dealing with a bunch of different enterprises that have been in a sense rather artificially brought together under one rubric. Why does this matter? It matters because it liberates us to be more differentiated, more selective in our approach to the question as to whether or not spirituality is good for health than we might have thought we could have been. We can resist the idea that it's all or nothing. You either accept the claim and all that is used to justify it or you don't. Instead what you now perhaps feel you can do is you can evaluate the different claims on their own merits and think through the implications and larger stakes of each of the components on their own terms. And when you begin to do that, again, history will be helpful to you because history reveals the extent to which each of the four endeavors that I've reviewed for you today is actually--no matter how much the language they employ in the present day is medical and scientific in its verbiage--historically, they are all in different ways complexly intertwined with histories of specific faith traditions in this country. And why does this matter? Because it helps explain why the claim that spirituality is good for your health is just not equivalent to the claim that going to the gym is good for your health or that a low fat diet is good for your health. The larger cultural and ethical and even political stakes that we often sense at play in all this work is real. And it's real because it was built into these claims in the process of their historical construction.

So partly for this reason--coming on to my third claim--each of the four endeavors--because they're distinct--turns out to have different cultural resonances, turns out to appeal in its own terms to different sectors of our society. Now, what's important about this? Well, it reveals to us the extent to which we're not dealing with a single set of stakes, but with a series of stakes and some of which may actually pull in different directions. Put another way, the placebo researchers, the wired-for-God researchers are not playing for the same stakes as the prayer researchers who again are really playing for quite different stakes than the meditation researchers. We need to be able to see these different endeavors as distinct, but we also need to have some sense of the dynamic tensions that exist among them.

Partly also because this history is important here--going on to my fourth going, each of the four endeavors turns out to have quite different scientific and metaphysical resonances. This is building on my other point. The point here--the basic way to put this point here is that some of these endeavors would fit--some of these claims will fit quite comfortably within current norms of scientific and medical naturalism, but others of them and of course particularly I'm thinking here of the prayer research, are efforts in effect to cause a rent in the very fabric of scientific naturalism. And it's important to have that--to realize this.

My last point, finally, because of the way they've emerged historically, each of these four endeavors remains in our own time, now, unstably connected with the various faith traditions that they now are studying. And this is, I think, the most important point of all because out of this point comes a kind of a recommendation. And the recommendation is this. It may very well be worthwhile continuing to pursue medical and scientific research into some or even all of the claims that I've reviewed for you today. I don't want to judge that. But what I do want to say is that given the complex cultural identity possessed by each of the endeavors interested in these claims, it's going to take more than just doing good science to do this well. You have to--it's going to take more than just being a good natural scientist to do this well. To do this well, you are going to have to also learn to be good social scientists. To do it well, one needs to have a sense of the way

in which this research is going to be perceived by those who in one way or another--any research that you do is likely to be perceived by those who in one way or another may be tempted to use it either in the service of religious apologetics or religious debunkings. You need to know about the territory in which you're working. You need to get smart about the way in which it's likely to be used.