

**Fourth International Conference of the
British Association for the Study of Spirituality**

***Can spirituality transform our world?
New frontiers in understanding and
exploring contemporary spiritualities***

Monday 23 May - Thursday 26 May 2016

**KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:
BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES & ABSTRACTS**

KEYNOTE 1: PROFESSOR GRAHAM HARVEY

Dr Graham Harvey is Professor and Head of Department of Religious Studies at the Open University, UK. He is also President of the British Association for the Study of Religions. His research and publications primarily engage with Jews, Pagans and indigenous peoples. He is particularly interested in "animism" and is author of *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (Columbia University Press, 2005) and editor of *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (Routledge 2013). In 2013 he also published *Food, Sex and Strangers: Understanding religion as everyday life* (Routledge) in which he argued for a thoroughly relational, material, performative and this-worldly definition of and approach to religion, rooted in fieldwork among Anishinaabeg, Jews, Maori, Pagans, Yoruba, and others. He is now working on a monograph about purity protocols and practices.

'If SBNR people are not religious what difference do they make?'

Modernity's project of secularisation may be challenged by the resurgence of religion in the public sphere (indicated most dramatically by religiously motivated conflicts but also in more everyday contexts) and by the rising profile of spirituality in, for example, health care and business training programmes. Classically, spirituality has been differentiated from religion along seemingly Cartesian lines: the former being the fully interiorised and privatised form of otherwise communal and institutionalised religion. This presentation questions whether this division works. Taking a relational or personalist approach to the topic, it considers what

interactions and more-than-"individualistic" commitments are helpfully labelled and theorised as spirituality. It seems to make sense of the difference the SBNR phenomenon makes to scholarly debates about ways of re-assembling human and larger-than-human acts in the everyday world.

KEYNOTE 2: DR MIKE KING

Dr Mike King is now a freelance scholar. He has four degrees from British Universities spanning the disciplines of arts, science and religion. He has published over sixty papers, book chapters, film and book reviews, and five books at the intersection of these fields. He has developed graphic software systems, exhibited his digital artworks nationally and internationally, and received research funding for the history of computer art, and also for a digital archive of the works of sculptor Peter King. He has been a Director of the Scientific and Medical Network, and Reader at London Metropolitan University. He is now a Quaker and full-time independent scholar. His most recent books are *Luminous: The Spiritual Life on Film*, and *Quakernomics: An Ethical Capitalism*.

'The Epistemology of Spiritual Happiness'

Claims that spirituality lead to well-being or happiness are easily refuted on the grounds that well-being and happiness are found in those adamantly non-spiritual and non-religious. Hence I explore a different claim, that spiritual happiness has merely a specific nature, or rather natures in the plural, all of the linked to 'truth' (classically written with a capital 'T' and now a contested notion). This pluralistic claim leads us to the requirement for a taxonomy, and also the requirement for an epistemology, of spiritual happiness. In the first half of this talk personal spiritual experience of three types will be presented as first-person Alistair Hardy-style reportage, and in the second half the varied epistemology or truth-claims of the contents of this reportage will be explored.

KEYNOTE 3: PROFESSOR MEL GRAY

Professor Mel Gray is Professor of Social Work in the School of Humanities and Social Science at the University of Newcastle in New South Wales, Australia. Mel has a critical interest in environmental ethics, spirituality and the transferability of knowledge across cultures and contexts, and professional and disciplinary borders. Her books interrogating these issues include *Environmental Social Work* (with Coates & Hetherington, Routledge 2013), *Decolonizing Social Work* (with Coates, Hetherington and Yellow Bird, Ashgate 2013), *Indigenous Social Work around the World: Towards culturally relevant social work practice* (with Coates and Yellow Bird, Ashgate 2010) and *Evidence-based Social Work: A critical stance* (with Plath and Webb, Routledge 2009). She also edited a Special Issue of the *International Journal of Social Work* 2012 on environmental social work with Coates with whom she has published widely on advancing an ecospiritual perspective.

'More than science: Spirit and tradition as evidence for environmental sustainability'

There is a sense in which all forms of knowledge – traditional or otherwise – are spiritual if we conceive of spirituality as related to a belief system about that which can be known or what we come to know and count as knowledge. Spirituality is usually linked to things that can't be known in the scientific sense. Implicitly, then, it makes no sense to try and find empirical grounds for our spiritual beliefs if they cannot be known scientifically. However, they can be known phenomenologically –

through a form of knowledge to which Habermas refers as 'historical-hermeneutical' in contra-distinction to the empirical, where facts can be discerned and explained, and critically reflective knowledge – the realm where we discern truth for ourselves. We might then say knowledge about the spiritual dimensions of human existence belongs in the realm of high level theories far removed from reality and not directly amenable to empirical validation; people do not easily let go of their high level theories. Low level theories are those open to empirical validation through scientific observation and experimentation, often taken as true unless proven otherwise. It is, however, the overlapping area of functional equivalency that enables people with vastly different beliefs systems to reach agreement on shared features of reality: these shared features are what bind human beings together regardless of their differences. This paper argues there is a normative dimension to our debates about the appropriateness of different forms of knowledge for different purposes, and that we do not need to prove everything empirically. To do so would rob the spiritual dimensions of our existence of their power. Now, more than ever before, the future of our Planet rests on our beliefs in the relationship between humans and Earth. While science debates the issues of climate change and environmental sustainability, we would do well to learn from the arcane wisdom of various Indigenous Peoples, whose perceptual alignment, reciprocity, and linguistic engagement with their environments created a deep ontological respect for our spiritual connection to the natural world.

KEYNOTE 4: PROFESSOR PHILIP J. LARKIN

Professor Philip J. Larkin has worked in Palliative Care in Ireland since 1992. In 2008, he was appointed Associate Professor of Clinical Nursing (Palliative Care) and is Director of Clinical Academic Partnership at UCD School of Nursing & Midwifery and Health Systems & Our Lady's Hospice and Care Services in Dublin. Philip is the incoming President of the European Association of Palliative Care (EAPC) having been Vice-President 2003-2007. He is the Chair of All Ireland Institute of Hospice and Palliative Care (AIHPC) and in recognition of his European and International work Philip received the Lifetime Achievement Award from Macmillan Cancer Support and the International Journal of Palliative Nursing in 2007. Philip was a Fulbright Scholar to the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in 2014 where he undertook research into compassion in palliative care.

'Compassion: the essence of palliative and end-of-life care'

The way in which dying people are cared for in a health system is an indicator of a compassionate society. The ability to exhibit compassion in professional clinical practice is often an implicit rather than explicit expectation of expert care. For some disciplines, such as nursing, it is presumed as a core attribute of demonstrable practice, although it is often hard to elucidate and define. At end-of-life, compassion resonates with the construct of a 'good death' but in recent times, there has been increased criticism in the UK media and statutory enquiry (such as the Francis Report) of a distinct lack of compassion in care delivery. This has led to unacceptable experiences of death and dying. This presentation will consider the value and function of compassion in caring for dying people. Framed by the hospice model of Cicely Saunders, the influence of her strong Christian perspective on the practice of end of life care will be discussed. Key attributes of compassion in care-giving will be explored from a sociological, philosophical and anthropological perspective. The need to develop compassionate practices which are both sustaining and nourishing for the health care practitioner in this work will be addressed. The challenge of embedding compassion into secular healthcare structures and opportunities to develop innovation which foster a greater understanding of the role of compassion in healthcare and society as a whole will also be presented.

KEYNOTE 5: DR FIONA GARDNER

Dr Fiona Gardner is currently Head of Social Work and Social Policy, Rural Health School, La Trobe University. She is an experienced social worker, manager and lecturer, who has written a number of books on critical reflection and critical spirituality, professional practice and working in human service organisations. Her most recent books are: *Critical Spirituality: A Holistic Approach to Contemporary Practice* (2011), a co-edited book (with Professor Jan Fook) on practical applications of critical reflection *Using Critical Reflection: Specific Applications in Health and Social Care Settings* (2013) and *Being Critically Reflective Engaging in Holistic Practice* (2014).

'Critical Spirituality as holistic practice'

Including the spiritual is an increasing expectation for those engaged in human services organisations, partly because of their work with those experiencing trauma and change and partly because of greater individual and community interest. Human service professionals currently wrestle with these expectations often feeling untrained and underprepared to undertake such practice. Critical Spirituality is a framework influenced by research with health and social care professionals who wanted to actively include the 'spiritual' in their professional practice. Critical spirituality means seeing people holistically, seeking to understand where they are coming from and what matters to them at a fundamental level; the level that is part of the everyday but also transcends it. This framework can be used to argue for the integration of the critical, the reflective and the spiritual into a coherent approach to practice that is holistic, inclusive and addresses issues of social justice. The expectation is to combine postmodern valuing of the diversity of individual and/or community spiritual experience with a critical perspective that asserts the importance of living harmoniously and respectfully at an individual, family and community level. This framework generates both principles and strategies for transforming practice and, through practice, the world.

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