

Is Chinese Medicine a Religion?

By Brian Carter, MSCi, LAc

Editor's note: An abridged version of "Is Chinese Medicine a Religion?" appeared in the July issue of *Acupuncture Today*. After discussions between Mr. Carter and Z'ev Rosenberg, LAc, it was decided to present a revised edition of the article in its entirety, which follows below.

Readers are also encouraged to read Mr. Rosenberg's article, which will appear in the August issue.

One of Chinese medicine's unique strengths is its integration of mind, body and spirit. It attracts patients and students who seek not only healing, but also spiritual transcendence and depth. It's a wonderful system of links between consciousness and organs, emotions and physical symptoms -- but there is a downside. When you bring spirituality into the picture, you invite controversy and division. This may surprise the one-world, one-spirit crowd, but for Christians, Jews or Muslims, it's not so simple.

"Oh," you say. "Well, that's probably just a few people, and I won't be treating them anyway." Think again. Gallup and other polling services indicate that most Americans are Christians. The American Religious Identity Survey (ARIS) sampled 50,000 Americans in 2001 and found the following breakdown: 76.5% Christian; 1.3% Jewish; 0.5% Muslim; 0.5% Buddhist, 0.5% Agnostic, and 0.3% for "other religious groups," including Taoists, New Age, Wicca, and Native American (*editor's note:* 19.6 percent of those surveyed did not specify a religion or refused to answer the survey). Over the last few years, all groups grew except for Jews and Agnostics.

Here's what's at stake: Whether Americans will think acupuncture is an option for them, whether they will feel comfortable in your office, and whether they will stay with you through a course of treatment. Your ability to get patients, help them, and make money is on the line. If you want to reach more people and offend fewer of them, if you want Chinese medicine to reach more Americans, then pay attention. Bear in

mind that I mean non-physician acupuncturists, because MDs and DOs could take acupuncture - and no other part of Chinese medicine - to the masses without us.

There are inappropriate topics for every situation. First dates are the wrong time to disclose your old cocaine problem or childhood sexual trauma. The dinner table forbids religion and politics. Tact is always germane.

How do acupuncturists make patients uncomfortable? Some display Buddhist idols. What does Buddhism have to do with Chinese medicine? Some indiscriminately teach eastern spirituality. Are you prepared to answer if and how that fits your patient's religion? Some play Native American music featuring howling wolves. Tell me again: how many Native Americans were there in China? Some display poster art of Taoist or Hindu gods or famous Chinese medicine doctors fashioned into gods. To many, these are false idols.

Is it news to you that three major world religions might think acupuncture conflicts with their beliefs? For many of them, spirituality often comes first. If they believe Chinese medicine threatens that, they'll never come to us. If we are going to help these people medically, we need to be sensitive.

Granted, some patients may be excited about your spiritual ideas, but others just want medical help. The latter will be confused, insulted or scared off by your conversion attempts. So, what's more important to you - treating people medically, or transmitting your spiritual beliefs? Are patients coming for medical help or spirituality? Do you want their visit to be about whether their deeply held convictions about God, life, and the afterlife are wrong? If not, don't bring up your spirituality in your speech, marketing materials, or office décor.

Z'ev Rosenberg, LAc, a professor at the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine and orthodox Jew, amplifies:

"Observant Jews have a very specific way of defining what is considered worship or prayer for themselves, without necessarily passing judgment upon the faith or philosophy of others. For example, any sort of focus on Hindu or Tibetan deities (or Taoist ones, like Quan Yin) is not considered appropriate for observant Jewish people. When I studied with Dr. Lad in ayurvedic medicine 22 years ago, I respectfully left the room when he led religious chanting.

"Professional Chinese medicine doesn't present any problems to me as an observant Jew. I find the lifestyle of Chinese medicine enriches my Jewish practice, and vice versa. In Chinese medicine schools, I think that teaching religious practices should be discouraged, as it may be a source of great discomfort to those of other religions. I think this is not a problem at PCOM and other 'mainstream'

institutions. If students want to explore these areas, they are free to do so on their own.

"Ted Kaptchuk once said that it is not our job to teach or sell religion to people, or make their moral/ethical decisions for them, but to help them make their own choices within their chosen tradition. That is a line I try not to cross, especially since Judaism is a non-proselytizing path."

In America, Chinese medicine is still small-time. There are only about 15,000 of us, compared to 800,000 MDs, and 200 million potential patients. If we want Chinese medicine to reach these people, we need to emphasize the medical side of Chinese medicine. We can't afford to make mind-body medicine a pulpit for spiritual beliefs.

American acupuncturists are diverse. The ones I've met are philosophers, psychologists, hippies, new-agers, scientists and sports freaks. From student to professional, many mature into regular medical practitioners, but I can see from some articles and advertisements that new-age beliefs and spiritual relativism still influence the way we see and portray ourselves.

What is new age? It's a diverse mixture of people and beliefs without a central text or dogma. New-Agers may use astrology, crystals, channeling or tarot cards. They may define God as a higher state of consciousness, a total realization of human potential, or believe every person is God.

What is relativism? Relativism is the belief that all viewpoints have equal value. Everyone can have his or her own truth, and all paths lead to the top of the mountain, but 78.3% of America cannot accept relativism, because three major faiths - Judaism, Islam and Christianity - each claim they are the only right one.

I am often asked to answer the questions and concerns of Christians about Chinese medicine. I get e-mails such as the following:

Prospective patient: "I've never considered acupuncture before, but an acquaintance suggested it. I am a committed Christian and have always thought that the two - Christianity and acupuncture - were completely incompatible."

Prospective student: "I am considering entering the field of traditional Chinese medicine, but am stuck as to whether it and my faith as a Christian can work together."

Concerned patient: "I still am uncomfortable with the Eastern philosophy and religion that this doctor practices. Every inch of his office, hallways, waiting room, and patient rooms were filled with awards, writings and pictures that felt so new-age to me."

I explain to people that the acupuncturist's spirituality doesn't have to be a problem. ("Does the spirituality of the medical nurse who takes your blood with a hypodermic needle threaten you?") I suggest they tell their acupuncturist their concerns up front, and expect that the acupuncturist will respect them and their spirituality. If they're really anxious, I advise them to pray for protection.

But that isn't always enough. As I was writing this article, a Christian woman e-mailed me. She and her husband were finally able to afford an acupuncturist, so she went to see one who had been an RN for 29 years (the patient was looking for a professional medical scenario). On her first visit, she was dismayed by a Buddha statue in the office. She talked about her Christian faith. Even so, during a treatment she noticed the acupuncturist praying over her: a spiritual violation, from her perspective. The patient won't be going back.

Let's clarify: What is spirituality? The meaning of this word has become less specific. I once asked a Five-Element acupuncturist what he meant by spiritual, and he said he really meant emotional. There is a huge difference between emotional and spiritual. Spirituality refers to the realm of spirit. It may affect the emotions, but they are not identical.

Do points that calm the shen affect the spirit, or just the mind? Perhaps they alter the neurochemistry of the brain, and thus the tenor of the mind. From this perspective, very little Chinese medicine concerns the spirit realm. Indirectly, it may improve the quality of life and thus enable growth, or the reception of spiritual truths.

The most directly spiritual ideas of Chinese medicine are the *hun* (which connects to "universal consciousness"), and ghost possession. I've never heard any elucidation on the nature of what was meant by universal consciousness. Experts differ on whether possession is a psychoemotional or spiritual phenomenon. As far as I know, these ideas don't oppose the Christian worldview; Jesus cast out evil spirits, for example.

How we explain *qi* is another stumbling block. Scientific skeptics are certain that vitalism (the idea that the functions of an organism are due to a vital principle distinct from physiochemical forces) has been disproved. If you characterize *qi* as the "vital life force," they'll look at you with either disdain or pity.

If you insist *qi* is a spiritual force, you'll raise questions for the Christians. In Christianity, not all spiritual things are good. Satan is just as much a spiritual being as Jesus, but Satan is evil. Demons are evil spirits. Many Christian writers and ministers have concluded that since *qi* is not in the Bible, if it is a spiritual force, it must be evil. It may sound funny to you, but for them it has grave implications.

Is *qi* spiritual? I don't think so. For me, it's a medical term, useful for diagnosis and treatment. I know some of you disagree, but since the 1950s the Chinese have boosted, moved and anchored *qi* without spiritual overtones. The atheistic perspective of the Communists wouldn't allow it, and the Chinese medicine still works, so spirituality must not be essential to Chinese medicine.

We need to think about our office décor, our patient-practitioner discussions and our marketing materials. Take an inventory. If you find things offensive to other belief systems, please rethink your approach. Hopefully, your concern is for the well-being of your current and future patients. Please accept my challenges to focus primarily on helping your patients with medicine, and to be tactfully silent about spiritual matters.

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