[Book review of:] Sarah Coackley (ed.), Spiritual Healing: Science: Meaning, and Discernment
Peels, R.

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Spiritual healing is a foundational element of the Christian faith. In our secular times, deeply influenced by science, technology, and secular philosophical paradigms like naturalism, scientism, and reductionism, the notion of spiritual healing raises important questions, though. *Spiritual Healing: Science, Meaning, and Discernment* combines the insights from radically different disciplinary fields: theology (pastoral and biblical theology in particular), anthropology, philosophy, history, psychiatry, medicine, and neurology. The book functions as a two-edged sword: it tackles scientistic assumptions that reduce experiences of pain and suffering to physical processes, but it also shows where naive theological and immature religious responses go wrong. The volume, then, is insightful not only for religious believers who struggle with or seek to understand practices surrounding spiritual healing but also for those who are skeptical of there being any spiritual dimension to healing.

Anglican priest, systematic theologian, and philosopher of religion Sarah Coakley has done an impressive job of integrating these perspectives and turning this into a truly multidisciplinary project. The recent flourishing of various alternative and complementary therapies (fascination with the occult, religious eclecticism, spiritual practices) next to regular medical treatment and mainstream religious practices, as well as the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and the various medical, religious, political, and cultural responses to it, have made the issue all the more urgent. Coakley, who is Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity emerita at Cambridge University and research professor at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, is well-known for her work on religious belief, patristics, feminist theory, and sexuality and gender, particularly as found in her monographs *Sacrifice Regained: Reconsidering the Rationality of Religious Belief* (2012), *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (2013), and *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (2015).

It’s helpful to be clear on the terminology at the outset. Two distinct understandings of *spiritual healing* play a role in the book. On the one hand, one can take it to be healing that is not strictly physical but that relates to the psychic, nonsomatic, or spiritual dimensions of the self. On the other hand, one can understand it to mean a healing that is directly effected by God. Clearly, these two are related but distinct meanings. Both can play a role in religion.

The book addresses issues surrounding spiritual healing in three consecutive parts. The first part provides biblical (Beverly Roberts Gaventa) and historical perspectives on the issue. The latter concern nineteenth-century Catholic France (Emma Anderson) and historical perspectives on the issue. The latter concern nineteenth-century Catholic France (Emma Anderson) and nineteenth-century Protestant America...
That is of course highly selective and not representative of the history of spiritual healing. I take it, though, that these chapters are meant merely to show what some actual responses to the challenges surrounding spiritual healing have been in the course of time. The book, after all, is not meant as an exhaustive historical account. The second part concerns the light science sheds on healing—namely, the neural investigation of pain (Howard L. Fields), brain and cognitive processes in healing (Malcolm Jeeves), and the by now classical topic—think of the seminal step and mantra studies, among other things—of prayer and placebo (by Anne Harrington). The third part, which is philosophical in nature, provides the perspectives of philosophy of mind (Philip Clayton) and ethics (Stephen R. L. Clark). Philosophy of science, metaphysics, and epistemology are remarkably absent here. The fourth and final part concerns anthropological (Thomas J. Csordas) and pastoral-care (John Swinton) perspectives. The book does not contain full-fledged perspectives from systematic theology, the philosophy and theology of liturgy, and the like, and it is not entirely clear why that is.

The volume conclusively demonstrates at least five important things about healing. First, it is sometimes perfectly rational to ascribe healing to a transcendental force, such as God, which means that it cannot be fully investigated in all its facets by science and medicine. Second, there are alternative explanations of healing to purely medical ones, on the one hand, and purported acts of God that defy modern scientific explanations, on the other. Third, all experiences of disease and healing come with certain meanings and interpretations. Interpretation, particularly interpretation of pain and suffering, is intrinsic to physiological experiences, and scientific explanations need to take it on board. Crucial to such meaning conferral processes are religious narratives. Fourth, developments of biomedicine create new room for serious theological and philosophical engagement when it comes to healing. What we need is not new superstition but careful and integrated scientific, theological, and philosophical reflection. Fifth, when it comes to healing, the science and religion debate has often been cashed out entirely in terms of the efficacy of intercessory prayer, but there are further significant and perhaps even better questions to be asked, ones that can be answered only interdisciplinarily.

One of the distinctive and rare features of the volume is that it pays explicit attention to the pastoral dimensions of this issue in science and religion. Coakley herself, for instance, summarizes what she considers to be the four main pastoral lessons of the book as follows: (1) The meaning-making context is crucial to any event of healing; without a hermeneutic, healing rituals easily become superstitious repetitions or even expectations of magic. (2) In such
processes of meaning discernment, prayerfulness, patience, gentleness, and a nonjudgmental attitude are pivotal. (3) We need more teaching and critical thinking about the philosophical, theological, medical, and scientific issues involved in spiritual healing, and we need such teaching even in parochial contexts. This is a surprising, but directly relevant conclusion for, for instance, church contexts—and from my own experience I can only confirm that she is right about this. (4) The most profound healing at the end of life may be the acceptance of death, and preparing oneself for this should start early in life. This is controversial, because it is part and parcel of the Christian faith that death in a sense does not belong to life as intended by God. There is and remains something unacceptable about it. Yet, she is right that there are various ways in which one can prepare for one's own death.

Finally, I think the volume implies an important point about the science-religion debate that extends far beyond its own particular theme, even though that point is not explicitly made in the volume. The point is that the science-religion debate has often been focused, maybe even myopically, on the alleged doctrinal clash between science and religion, for instance, when it comes to evolutionary theory: Does that theory conflict with divine guidance, with humans being created imago Dei, with a historical fall, and so on? Or when it comes to cosmology: Does the scale and size of the universe count against God, and what does big bang cosmology mean for the doctrine of creation? The book can be read as a convincing plea to broaden this debate so as to include the relation between science and religion when it comes not so much to doctrine but to religious practices. Doctrine and practice are of course related, yet they are distinct things that raise their own worries. How does what we know from science and academic scholarship more broadly relate to the sacraments, including the Eucharist and baptism but perhaps also, say, marriage? How does it relate to ritual washing, to circumcision, to practices and rituals of commemoration, to fasting, to singing and worshipping, to speaking in tongues, to prophecy, to preaching, to anointment? Clearly, there is much unexplored territory in the science-religion debate, and Coakley is to be lauded for this impressive contribution to this flourishing field of research.

Rik Peels
Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities; Faculty of Religion and Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
h.d.peels@vu.nl
References

