

THE PERIL OF GENERIC SPIRITUALITY

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A personal reflection on THE FIRST NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SPIRITUAL CARE
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In my mail today was a card whose franking included this USPO promo: "Splash into an Ocean of Fun! Collect stamps!" Well, I did that when I was a small boy. Was ecumenical: tried to get at least one stamp from every country on earth, which wasn't so hard then, as there were only half as many countries as now. Besides the esthetic & squirrel values of the hobby, it's one way to get a **global sense** by doing something in addition to reading. The card's personal message to me was that I should switch from my specific religion to **religion in general**, or rather use "**compassion**" as universal solvent on all the world's religions.

The illusion of a somehow contrived world faith has since the Renaissance beguiled intellectuals into dreams of a generic **global piety** with no label except "**Spirituality**." This century's anguishes have intensified this longing & dreaming, & we have labels for aspects of this: "multiculturalism," "New Age," "multireligious ecumenism," "socialism," "communism," et al.

The card, with Buddhist idol on the front, continues: "The goal must be to get beyond the crippling, fearful limits of each religion unto God's highest law, compassionlife....We've wasted enough time with your approach! All religion is but a pathetic attempt to ascend unto compassionlife. All prior religions must pass away. Awaken!" Notice "prior": the writer is inventing a religion he calls "compassionlife." (I've done Thinksheets on "Compassion as Religion," "Psychology as Religion," "Sociology as Religion," "Science as Religion," "Love as Religion." What can't be made into a religion [or addiction]?)

Because Hospice's primary secular & sacred ministry is to those whose candle is guttering out, & because Hospice patients are of every conceivable religious commitment & "spirituality" & none, the abiding temptation is to **eliminate the cognitive** (the vision-idea-commitment of specific religion-spirituality, an area where Hospice workers, especially Hospice chaplains, can run into trouble) & **accentuate the emotive** (the patient's & family's feelings, the caregiver's compassion). The peril of this generic spirituality is right here. What one minimizes loses energy & then reality, & the reverse is true of what one emphasizes. It's not surprising, but on the contrary inevitable, that individual Hospices & the Hospice movement in general--as the conference abundantly displayed--should drift into compassion-as-religion & the goals of Christian-physician-founder Cicely Saunders should shrink down into helping patients be "comfortable & at peace" so they can "die with dignity." The irony here is that when the cognitive is demeaned by neglect, the patient is insofar treated with indignity, with a spiritual sedation paralleling the reprehensible medical practice of keeping the patient sedated not at the optimal level for the patient's whole being but at the level of the medical caregivers' convenience.

About 400 Hospice chaplains at the conference heard leaders babbling away hour after hour, day after day, in general-spirituality newspeak. Publicly, in response to my question about this, Robert Coles called it "*sanitized speech*"--medical metaphor implying the humorous antonym "polluted speech" (as though speakers' use of their normal religious language would disease the atmosphere!). To what audio-contortions some went to avoid saying "God" or even "prayer"! (The management had set up a "Meditation Room," but no "Prayer Room" or "Prayer & Meditation Room" or even "Meditation & Prayer Room." That's what I asked Coles to comment on, his response with a smile being "Sanitized speech.")

I intend no total blackwash of the conference, which was as good as could be expected given the givens. But my commentary must stress what most burdened me about it. So on to particulars:

1 Attending all plenums & lectures & as many workshops as possible (& listening to tapes of some simultaneous with ones I attended), I heard only one reference to the **afterlife**, & that one was not by a Christian or Jew but by Baba

Ram Dass (nee Rich. Alpert, deracinated Jew [erstwhile Freudian-atheist Harv.prof.psy.]), a Hindu-Buddhist! Understandable if the conference were on a secular theme--but it was on "spiritual care"! Understandable if the conference were on prenatal care, before the beginning of physically separate human life--but it was on the other end of life, the death-end, the end impinging on afterlife issues! In light of the prominence of afterlife issues in the West's spiritual history, we must conclude that what we have here is a second radical repression within the West's theological range, the first being "God." Kant's RELIGION WITHIN THE LIMITS OF REASON has become religion within the limits of "nature" & whatever logos may be inferred from "process," meaning natural processes: "God" & "afterlife" are excluded, banned because supernatural.

2 Am I laying all this only on the conference, as though its planners had engaged in a pernicious positivistic plot? Not only, & not as a plot: given their publicschool & subsequent educations, including theological, it was "natural" for them to avoid "God" & the afterlife.

A tragicomic story on modern theological education's turning wine into water. Robert Coles told us of his mother's anger, & his, when her pastor visited her as she lay dying. She asked him to read the Bible to her, but he refused: he was into reflecting her feelings about what was happening to her! Said Coles, "I think I'd've thrown the Bible at him."

IRONY: Hospice is heavily into anti-denial in the case of death. Its semi-sacred texts includes THE DENIAL OF DEATH and ON DEATH AND DYING (in the latter, the first "stage" being "denial"). But the denial, by neglect or circumlocation, of said theologoumena ("God" & afterlife), is taken in stride.

EXAMPLE: Two nuns took over two hours to detail a score of their death-ministry experiences. When I remarked to one of them that they'd made no reference to the afterlife, she said "It never came up." I: "Neither the patient nor you brought it up." She: "Right." I: "Why didn't you bring it up?" She: "It's private, & we're against the invasion of privacy." I: "Is it any more private than other spiritual matters you deal with in 'spiritual care'?" She: "Well,....[silence]." I: "Do you believe in an afterlife?" She: "Yes, but it's an area of mystery. Nobody can know anything about it till after death." I: "You are a Christian. Have you no information about it from our resurrected Lord?" She: "Well, yes." I: "Wouldn't it have been appropriate, in at least some of the cases you narrated, to share that information?" She: "I never thought of doing that." I: "You never thought of sharing with the dying the beyond-death hope you have in Christ?" She: "No, I think that would have been imposing my religion on them." I: "More than when you witness your faith to the non-dying?" She: "Well, I really don't do that either. Not in words. I try to live my religion & let people draw their own conclusions." I: "Isn't talking part of living & thus part of living your religion?" She: "I never thought of it that way. I suppose you're right." I, on another tack: "Our society is in a moral mess & muddle. Are you personally morally serious enough to believe that the consequences of human behavior extend beyond death?" She: "Well, I never thought about that either...."

Kant thought that "God & immortality" were the bottom line about human life. Ironically, he helped erase that line, so that millions among us "never thought about" either God or the afterlife. It's common for Hospice chaplains to hear from the dying, "I never thought much about...."

The conference was worthless to anyone who came seeking help on how to be **bilingual** (a common vocabulary with the special lexicon of one's own faith-commitment). The reason is plain: it's dictional energy went into (1) practicing generic speech & (2) avoiding religion-specific lexica (eg, "God") & ideas (eg, the afterlife).

3 What references there were to an afterlife were amoral: either it doesn't exist, or everybody's a shoo-in (amoral universalism, naïvely supposed proved by so-called "after-death experiences" narrated by returnees). This flaccidity well correlates with, & is buttressed, by our current society's permissivism. If amoral hereafter, why not amoral, or immoral, here?

By contrast, in the early Church the afterlife was a powerful sanction against the temptations of environments, such as Corinth, hostile to Christian faith & life. Corinth leapt to mind, for in devotional reading this morning I came across this in Zink's intro to his German paraphrase of ICor. (my tr.): "In the Mediterranean world, 'to Corinth' meant 'to lead a wicked life.' In this letter Paul makes clear to the [Christian] community what it is that identifies us as belonging to Christ, what it means to take up the cross, to have God's Spirit, & to await the resurrection of the dead." Churches serious about behavior, about morality, teaching consequentialism on both sides of death, are vigorous & growing: churches that have largely abandoned personal eschatology are weak & declining. My guess is that the conference's leaders are members of weak & declining churches. Christianity is not an otherworldly religion (like Orphism) or a thisworldly religion (like Humanism); it's a bothworldly religion when practiced in its fullness.

Hospice spiritual care unembarrassedly pushes clearing up your horizontal "unfinished business" (human-relations repentance & forgiveness) before death but is less pushy about vertical (divine-human) unfinished business. Strictly, perhaps the former should be called "social care" & only the later "spiritual care." Thinking of that im/possibility has the virtue of questioning the opposite extreme, viz gauzy, deliberately vague definitions of "spiritual."

4 What, in biblical perspective, is spiritual care for the dying? It is helping them walk forgiven & joyful into the arms of God. It is to help them grasp with their whole being that in God nothing good is ever lost. It is to help their inner eyes day by day see "the light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." It is to help them, against all pain & loss, experience each day as a pre-play of heaven. (What strength Dorothy Day got out of Catherine of Siena's "All the way to heaven is heaven"! And what strength Robert Coles, via D.D., draws from it [he quoted it at the conference]! And how sad, how self-improverishing, that at the conference there was almost nothing of this God-&-heaven note!)

5 Minorities control only when majorities permit it. Some majorities even promote the tyranny of some minorities. Sometimes majorities are so paranoid about offending minorities that they repress expressing a majority view even though no "minority" is present. Though the conference attenders were almost all Christians, the leaders strictly observed the upper-middle-class tabu against "imposing your religion on anyone." Occasionally, Christianity was indirectly & somewhat apologetically referred to as "the dominant religion among us." How "dominant"? Certainly not in the conference's structure. Eg, no meeting was opened with prayer, though some sessions were by "guided meditation" a la Esalen. And the leaders' Christian language did not "dominate," indeed did not even appear. We Christians constituted almost the entire body of the conference, but we were "dominant" only in the diminished sense that there were more of us. Why, then, the excessively strong verb "to dominate"? Because it reflects the tabu against having verbal dominion over anybody. A pathetic pathology passing for tolerance, sensitivity, compassion--passing, ie, for a virtue.

6 The bathetic phenomenon I'm remarking here is, again, not limited to the conference but is pervasive in the West, esp. in its self-bashing upper-middle-class subculture, esp. among Christians when in the presence of nonChristians (esp. Jews, then secularists & devotees of other religions). Call it **linguistic keno-sis**, a situational emptying out of our holy words from fear they may offend non-Christians.

I've noticed the phenomenon in the media & even in museums. Recently in the High Desert Museum (Bent, OR) I saw an Amerind display-case marked "The Great Spirit." Hopefully I examined the artifacts' labelings--& found not one reference to the Great Spirit, ie to God. To keep the language inoffensively atheist (as though atheism doesn't offend much of the public!), natural expressions were contorted. A sign should have read "The spiritual focus was inseparable from everyday life....Physical and spiritual sustenance were a gift from the Great Spirit." But scratch those last three words of mine & substitute "creation." An unhistorical bowdlerization....We're in big trouble.

7 "I heard only one reference to the afterlife," I said in §1, & that was not to a life beyond death but (as in the Gospel of Jn., "eternal life") a timeless life available now, shrinking physical death to small significance. The same speaker, Ram Dass, was notable for another "only": only he among the speakers aggressively promoted his religion, which is vedic-upanishadic advaita (Skr., "a[not]-dva[dual]," ie the attainment of consciousness "awakening" (buddha="enlightenment") to the (metaphysically asserted) "fact" of monism, viz that reality is one & that the notion of duality (eg, God/creation or God/humanity) is illusion (Skr., "maya"). Sitting lotus, he lashed out at another speaker, Rabbi Harold Kushner, calling him "not religious" but "a humanist"; & at Dame Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern Hospice movement, for having a wrong view of death, viz the Christian view that, as CS puts it, "death is an outrage" (as, eg, in ICor.15).

When I asked him whether an orthodox Christian like Mother Teresa can be as effective in working with the dying as he is without converting to his metaphysics, he paused longer than at any other time during the evening, then responded thus to my specific wording ("Mother Teresa is an orthodox Christian. Can an orthodox Christian experience what you are speaking of?"): "Not in the role of an orthodox Christian but as a being with another being." I: "The same must be said for you, sir: not in the role of a preacher of nonduality but as a being with another being. Since the latter is what you have to say to Hospice workers in spritual care, your metaphysics, though central to your spiritual witness, is as separable from your being a being with another being as is Mother Teresa's dualistic metaphysics from her being a being with another being--or you should withdraw the separation you made in the case of Mother Teresa." His only reply was a shrug. Evangelists of any gospel want their audiences to believe that the salvation they offer is available only as a package deal, the packing being the preacher's worldview, which includes a reality-view ("metaphysics"), ie what the preacher believes is really real. RD & I meet this definition of evangelist. His gospel is his worldview-metaphysics & his prescriptive behavior, and he tried to breach Mother Teresa's gospel by cutting her worldview-metaphysics (which he rejects) loose from her prescriptive behavior (her work with the dying, of which he approves). My response was to breach his gospel with the same attack-machinery he had used on her. Call it evangelomachy, a war of gospels. Always & everywhere it happens when salvation-systems (here "gospels") tangle, "& may the best man win" (ie, the "gospel" that has the most to offer human beings in their lifelong struggle for sense, solice, serenity, security, & ultimate salvation).

Observe, please, that RD's approach to Hospice is sectarian: he imposes his metaphysics along with what he has to say about spiritual care for the dying. My approach is ecumenical: I share how I see God/earth/life/society/future as situationally appropriate--which requires me to be bilingual, both a common speech & my special Christian language being available to serve actual present human need. I had hope that the conference would offer Hospice chaplains help to become more bilingual, but this would require more respect for theology than the conference leaders showed. As this Thinksheet is being written at the request of some of those leaders, I hope they ponder both this need & the need to have (a panel of) theologian commentators at the next national spiritual-care Hospice conference.

Observe, too, that I'm not blaming RD for being an evangelist! I must, however, blame the management for having only one gospel represented by an evangelist. As for the other two plenary speakers, Rabbi Kushner only indirectly preached Judaism, & Dr. Coles only indirectly preached Christianity.

8 Back to the two nuns: when I asked one whether she'd ever seen a **deathbed conversion**, she said "No, & I wouldn't think much of that." Yet the image of death as a journey is common in Hospice. Could not conversion be preparation for that journey? Is not the Lord's Prayer itself conversional, calling us to repentance & renewal of life? But she said, "To confront dying people with that would be to take unfair advantage of them at their moment of greatest vulnerability." I: "Fairness? Would it be fair to withhold from the dying what you think most important for them to hear in living & dying? Does your need to

be what you call fair override the patient's need to hear the 'wonderful words of life?'" Always the patient's own gospel, if any, is to be respected: that's an essential ecumenical note in Hospice work. But Hospice workers in general, not just chaplains, should be ready, when appropriate, to share with dying patients & their loved ones what means most to them personally in life & in death--ie, their gospel. Not to be ready, but rather to repress what good news you have against death, is to be unfaithful both to your gospel & to those whom you've been given to serve. On this, as far as I could ascertain, the conference had nothing to say; & I hope the deficiency does not occur at the next conference.

9 When Ram Dass was asked "What is your response to the **NT idea about death?**," he went off on a discourse which remade Jesus into RD's image, with of course RD's idea of death. "Death is absolutely safe, like taking off a tight shoe." "Every method of getting to God is a necessary trap, & [we should]...hope that it self-destructs at the other end." (Contradiction: the NT is an instance of "trap," but he describes his own getting to "God" as a trip.)....After converting Jesus, he could (narcissistically) say beautiful things about him, such as "I love Jesus the Christ very deeply, who said that what dies is not what is true; & then said 'I will come back' [=, in RD's transmogrification, reincarnation],...the most magnificent teaching of the essence in holy literature." He's well polished in wowing "dominantly" Christian audiences with encomiums to (Guru) Jesus, who can help us "awaken out of dualism"(!).

What does he know of the NT's teaching on death? Probably very little. His trip from deracinated Judaism to advaita did not include a Christian stretch, nor even--it seems--a period of earnest study of the Bible & Christianity. Indeed, he exhibits two distances from Christianity--not only the distance from his chosen Indic religion but also an earlier distance, inherited from the antiChristianism of his residual Judaism.

A better format would have been to have RD & a biblical theologian respond to the questions from the audience. Many afterward remarked to me how unfair the conference planners were in providing no formal theological response to RD or any other speakers--but especially to RD, who was passionately preaching "another gospel" than that of almost all the present Hospice chaplains, who were hungry for help in integrating their Christian gospel & spiritual care.

Should only a biblical theologian serve as commentator? No, there should be a commentators' panel as one conversational dimension, this one between panel members & speakers, panel members & the audiences, & panel members & each other. That would add intellectual substance & sustenance to a conference otherwise cognitively anemic. Were there no panels? Only one, & that was nonconversational: it consisted of four monologists.

Analogically put: The thought content of Hospice, & of a Hospice conference, ought to be such that were it a chair or a table it would not collapse as soon as any weight were put upon it. I have two fears: (1) That intellectuals will squeeze the life out, dominating, silencing others, with relentless logic. And (2) that the unconsciously concerted forces of American anti-intellectualism will squeeze the brains out. The learned societies I'm a member of are in danger of the first; Hospice is one movement in danger of the second.

10 My impression is that far more women than men are in the Hospice army of workers, yet women were not among the prominent leaders of the conference, & all three of the special lecturers were men. Was Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern Hospice movement, invited to keynote, or even otherwise speak? And/or how about Florence Wald, one of the three founders of America's first modern Hospice, viz Hospice Connecticut? (The fact that HC is not a member of the National Hospice Organization should not have deterred an invitation to Florence to speak.)....But I'm flying blind here: maybe women were invited, & refused.

11 "All the animals" say that if God were Love, "we couldn't function." That's on p.404 of the only free book the conference provided, viz. Rich. Grossman's THE ANIMALS (Graywolf Press/90). Odd. You even mailed this out to all the

preregistrants! RG is a moneybag who can afford the self-promo, but why did you give him, & no other, a free ride? Probably you were just feeling congenial & your commonsense censor was asleep. I know some evangelical moneybags who'd've been glad to send a free book to everybody--but would you have accepted the offer? I doubt it. No more than a pelican can swallow a fish tail-first, but must throw it in the air till it comes down head-first so it'll go down smoothly, without interference from the fins. Well, RG's mystical mush stuck in my throat, as it must have in the throats of many others who gave it a good look. Eg, what is sin? "Unsatisfied need." Lovely. Not that I can't enjoy **atheist mystical naturalism** in good poetry, in which it's the beauty rather than the ideas that I enjoy. But almost all the conference attenders were theists who came to the conference on religious, not esthetic, business. (Remember Kierkegaard's warning about the slippery slope from religion down into mere ethics down into mere esthetics?) On cover p.3, a Zen abbot likes the book of course, as "a manual of inspiration for people who are working to nourish and heal the earth." Cover p.2 informs us that all the animals "speak the same language" (Esperanto?) & promises to lead us on "a wondrous journey toward a heightened spiritual awareness and a deeper appreciation of the sanctity of nature," & closes with "an extended hymn to the luminous forces that bind them [the shepherd & the animals] together in birth and death." Belief in "the sanctity of nature" is an alternative to theism, to biblical religion, in which only God is holy, & nature is only sanctifiable, not sacred. And "luminous forces" replace the biblical God.

Again, you need theological critiquing throughout your planning process as well as at your conferences. I would like to think you were unthinking when you distributed an antibiblical book, & no other, to a clientele whose religion is, perhaps without exception, biblical. But I fear the situation is worse: you can't recognize an antibiblical book when you see one.

12 Thanks for Robt. Coles, who was probiblical. Probably all of us had heard his Rudy Bridges story more than once before, but it doesn't grow old: it's his story of his conversion to "Father, forgive them..." to compassionate theism, to the Gospel. His story of the Bible & his dying mother was new, & in the spirit of his response to my religious-language question: "I don't know why we have to sanitize [ie, not use the Christian language] all the time." As for Ruby, she was age 6 in 1960 when rednecks threatened her; & many years later she said to RC, "I was lucky to have those people connect me with my God." Death is the ultimate earthly threat, &--if we are rightly guided inwardly & outwardly--it can connect us with God. How little we heard of this at the conference!

13 Two female physicians were present in spirit at the conference. Cicely Saunders, as founder. Eliz. Kubler-Ross, as phrase-maker, whose "**unconditional love**" kept popping up. Since in the Bible God's love is conditional, ie is moral, we must infer that "unconditional love" is an unbiblical if not antibiblical phrase. Is its vagueness intentional? It means, does it, that once Hospice leeches onto a patient, it won't let go? I've sometimes heard it compared to "grace," ie the divine love: it's loving as God loves. But since the biblical God's love is conditional, God being Judge as well as Father, the unconditional lover must be not like God but rather be god, be Eros-Cupid. It's all very gooey & warm-fuzzy & to me revoltingly sentimental & insipid. I can understand K.-R.'s taking up with that guru for a spell, & her prostituting some biblical terms to the religion she invented. But it puzzles me to see Hospice chaplains treating her patois as though it were compatible with the religion in which they've had higher education & to which they claim to be committed.

14 True Ryndes, ANP, MPH, was a fresh breeze in a stale atmosphere. He warned us against "trade-language," against the "low tolerance" typical of values-driven idealists, against "the addictive organization"; & well described Hospice as "a movement filled with rebels & renegades" (on the cutting edge or lunatic fringe), "a crucible of love & hostility." Maybe he was helped by not having had a theological education (painful thought to this old seminary professor!).

15 A danger of a national Hospice conference on spirituality is that it threatens

to encourage the formation of an **official Hospice theology**. Eg, while we're all rightly against the denial of death, at the conference I caught a number of instances of the denial of a nonpeaceful death--or, to deny the double negative, the goal of a peaceful death. A semi-dogma of the movement is "We die as we live." So why should a person who's lived unpeacefully die peacefully? One answer: It's easier on the caregivers. Further, projection is a factor here: the professional caregiver cultivates a peaceful style, & the patient tends to assimilate this whether or not it's for the patient's good. How, you say, could it not be for the patient's good? If the patient has left undone business that will if addressed rile the soul, that patient may, by the caregiver's "peace," leave that business undone.

When at the conference I asked around on this point, every time I got the answer that peace is the appropriate way to face dying & death. But can anti-cancer aggressive imaging (taught now by many who treat cancer) be called peaceful (when it's warlike!)? And how does this meet the need of the patient with morally appropriate afterlife fear? As to this last, everyone I raised this question with thought the patient should be disabused of afterlife fear. Why? Because "there's nothing to fear." How do you know that? "It's the universal testimony of near-death experiences." Here Raymond Moody & others are nudging out the Bible's moral seriousness about the afterlife.

Can you not see here an **official Hospice afterlife doctrine** in the making? Based not on Bible or reason or wide human experience of dying & death but on the experience of a small group of "returnees" from death, people whose brains have been unintentionally so deoxygenated that their neocortical powers have temporarily gone to sleep. Thus mentally depotentiated, the patient experiences "a great light" from the lower brain; &, if philosophically naive, may draw metaphysical inferences from this experience: (1) The afterlife is light without darkness, heaven without hell; & (2, another nondual inference) In death there's no distinction between my soul & God. A yogin, after years of practice, may deoxygenate his neocortex by swallowing his tongue, so he may (naively, though he thinks profoundly) experience *advaita*, nonduality. I had it done to me under U. of Calif. auspices with one cylinder each of O₂ & CO₂, so that with no discipline other than submission to the process I could have (for 2½ minutes; 4 minutes would have been vegetable) the "great light" *advaita* experience Ram Dass told the conference he achieved after two months of concentrating on his breathing while navel-gazing. (When later I accused him of neurological-spiritual naivete for drawing the Hindu-Buddhist metaphysical conclusion from the experience of self-hypnotic deoxygenization, he smiled nervously. One reason I was angry at the conference management for giving such prominence to Ram Dass is that his Eastern witness joins with death-returnees' experience to support the antibiblical afterlife doctrine now so common among Hospice practitioners. Again, Western theologians could provide balance & breadth by challenging that doctrine with the ethically-morally serious perspectives of biblical religion.)

16 **Two denials** are here common in our culture, the denial of death & the denial of afterlife. The usual answer, when I ask Hospice chaplains about their caregiver-patient conversation about the afterlife, is this: "It never comes up." I: Why don't you ever bring it up? "I wouldn't want to impose my view." **VIEWS:** (1, materialism) "When you're dead you're dead"; (2, idea-lism, Hindu-Buddhist) "You'll be a drop in the cosmic Ocean"; (3, agnosticism) "Nobody knows, nobody can know"; (4, biblical) "It depends on your relationship with God...." Notice that only the fourth view is open to--yes, and demanding of--further conversation. I observe much fear of that further conversation, & looking at that fear should be at least sometimes on the agenda when Hospice chaplains of biblical commitment (Christians & Jews) hold local, regional, & national conferences. Without carrying this further, I'll suggest this as one way to shape the issue: "What do you say when a patient asks, 'What's going to happen to me when I die?' If you've never heard the question, why do you think those patients of yours who've had the question have repressed it?"

(Exception: Hospice of Dayton's "Spiritual Assessment Form" [pp.75f of

"Conference Handouts"] does ask about "God/afterlife" [though thrice misspelling "Deity" as "Diety"].)

17 "Mental health" is a metaphor from physical "health," & "**spiritual health**" piggybacks on "mental health." In the conference one often heard of the dual need, in Hospice spiritual care, (1) to escape from captivity to the medical model (2) while remaining "on team" & increasing one's spiritual ministry in team. But I heard nothing of "spiritual health" as oxymoronic: much of highly creative spirituality, historically & existentially, would be called, by "therapists," pathological. Also, I heard nothing of the demonic, ie destructive spirituality, & little of the mystery of evil, sin, suffering, death....After wisely struggling to define "spiritual" & rightly stating our need of a common "spiritual language," Milton Hay defined "spiritual suffering" as "diminished spiritual capacity...." (p.39). Note the captivity of "suffering," in this phrase, to the medical model: "spiritual suffering" is something negative--though he as a Christian minister knows that Jesus' spiritual suffering was positive, indeed salvific & triumphal.

18 Solidly within the Western spiritual heritage, & fresh, was Deborah Hartman's seminar on "Staying with Suffering towards Transformation," despite the fact (contra Ram Dass & the death-naturalism pervasive in the American branch of the Hospice movement) that "death is not natural & is unacceptable." To the end of our control-ability, we have "the dignity of responsibility in communion with others & with God."

19 When the conference designer Ira Bates took me to lunch for an interview, I inquired as to why Hospice Conn. was in no way represented, the fact of their non-membership in NHO being, in my mind, insufficient to explain the absence. At least some of their literature could have been in the bookstore--eg, Salley Steenhusen Bailey et al, CREATIVITY AND THE CLOSE OF LIFE, a groundbreaking Hospice book. (The bookstore was one of the weakest departments of the conference.) A "national [Hospice] conference" should not be limited to formal members of "The National Hospice Organization." (As a conference designer Ira is a real pro: the design & arrangements were superb.)

20 The conference's lexicon (word-range) had a **pinched & prissy** quality that I'll call SC (sensitivity correct, on the model of PC [politically correct]--the diametrical of TC [theologically correct]). The "God"-evasion, the tabuing of biblical language, led to laughable-cryable rarefactions, circumlocutions, periphrases, euphemisms. These reductionisms brought to mind the jocular word "floccinaucinihilipilification" (OED says since 1741, & meaning "the action or habit of estimating as worthless"--from Lat. vocables meaning to make a mere "hairy" "nothing" of "woolly" "trifles"): the words most sacred to Christians were, mainly by neglect, disparaged, demeaned, at least disregarded. The excuse Christian leaders gave for this behavior was that they wanted to show "respect for those who are not of the dominant belief-system" (= a euphemism for "Christianity") & have a different way of speaking of "That Which We Encounter" (= a euphemism for "God"--which strikes me as ludicrously but accurately parallel to Rumpole's regularly referring to his wife as "She Who Must Be Obeyed").

The principle seems to be that anything any "minority" might object to is *outré*, out-of-bounds. When in a recent PTA meeting a Christian referred to Jesus, a Jew immediately jumped her with "Let us respect the differences among us." Later in the meeting, someone referred to God, & an atheist objected on the same ground. Result, no respect for "the differences among us"! Any differences among us are to be excluded from the PTA's--& the Hospice conference's--lexicon. This impoverishment of public discourse is worse than silly.

To avoid God-reference, a leader began a plenum with guided imagery, suggested we remember the child of the past within us, & "Go with that child, & be at peace." How sappy can you get? How far from tangency with the God who lords over the mysteries of evil, of good, & of love!

At the conclusion of the seminar on "Virtue Ethics," I had to point out that the presentation had been antisemitic, antichristian, & purely pagan-Greek. The philosopher was startled: apparently he hadn't noticed it. So far we've come.