Psychosis and Spirituality Revisited:
The Frontier is Opening Up!

Isabel Clarke

The first edition of this book began by observing that the connection between spirituality and psychosis was not new or surprising. Anyone familiar with the recurring themes of psychosis would recognise religious preoccupations as commonplace. Similarly, psychotic experience could be said to lie outside the domain of logical discourse and many would say the same of religious belief. Rather it was the way in which psychosis and spirituality had been kept so distinct that demanded explanation. The ‘New Frontier’ referred to in the title was explained as the breaking through into an area beyond the efforts to draw distinction between psychosis and spirituality, and an exploration of the creative possibilities that this vista revealed.

The challenge lay in linking the highest realms of human consciousness and the depths of madness. It was recognised that this challenge would feel uncomfortable to many. It required a rethinking of the nature of both psychosis and spirituality. I argued then that the psychological research, accounts from marginalised areas of discourse (such as the cross-cultural and anthropological perspectives) and data from personal experience brought together in the chapters of that volume demanded that this challenging new perspective be taken seriously.

That edition came out in 2001, but the material was essentially gathered in 1999. In the intervening 10 years, this perspective has emerged from the shadows into the light in a way that makes any special pleading about the need for a second edition of this book redundant. Instead, I will sketch in some of the developments that I am aware of that have contributed to this change of intellectual climate, and then trace the part played by the process that was started by the first edition of this book. That process began with conferences arising out of the book itself, and has ultimately contributed to the founding of a Spiritual Crisis Network in the United Kingdom.
Developing Interest in Spirituality in The Health Service

A number of developments have transformed a situation when spirituality was not talked about, in the late 1980s (when I entered the NHS) and today. There is a belated recognition that the religious and spiritual priorities of other cultural groups cannot be ignored in our multicultural society. The Royal College of Psychiatrists Spirituality Special Interest Group started in 1999. The National Institute for Mental Health in England (NIMHE) and the Mental Health Foundation (MHF), started their 5 year spirituality project in 2002. Gilbert *et al.* (2003), launched the ‘Inspiring Hope’ manifesto. The project has now ended, with the launch of another joint publication (Coyte, Gilbert and Nicholls, 2007). This project had represented an alliance between NIMHE, the body charged with leading progressive thinking in the health service, and the MHF, a service user-led organisation. At the same time, John Swinton and others were very active in raising the profile of spirituality in the nursing field (Swinton, 2001a, b; Swinton and Pattison 2001). Publications and research on spirituality in the nursing journals have flourished ever since.

Recognition of the relevance of spirituality for psychosis was slower in emerging and does not sit easily with the ‘illness’ model of psychosis. However, there are some straws in the wind here. In 2006, I was invited to contribute a paper to the Royal College’s *Spirituality SIG Newsletter* and present at a Spirituality and Mental Health Conference organised by the International Society for the Psychological Treatment of the Schizophrenias. The Somerset service user-led research project (Somerset Spirituality Project Group, 2002) was prominent among the pioneers of a new attitude to psychosis and spirituality.

The Recovery Approach

This service user-inspired movement which has been adopted by NHS Mental Health Services (see Ralph, Lambric and Steele, 1996, for the original research), identifies spirituality as a vital element in enabling people with serious mental health difficulties to rebuild a meaningful life. Within my own Trust, not trust, spirituality workshops run at recovery events laid the foundation for Spirituality Awareness Training for staff and now a Spirituality Network. There is increasing recognition that, irrespective of their personal position as regards spirituality, staff have a duty to those in their care to take this aspect of their lives seriously. In the context of the acute inpatient unit, this means no longer dismissing the spiritual content of psychotic communication as merely ‘illness’.

Psychosis and Spirituality: Launch of a Conversation

This conversation about the psychosis and spirituality overlap, a conversation amongst friends and allies, started a while before the book came out. During
1997–1998, I was on a learning curve. I had spent many years pondering the phenomenon of spirituality and its enduring place in human experience, despite the intellectual triumph of the scientific world view, which accorded it no role. As I studied psychology as a second degree, I applied psychological thinking to my sense that human beings had access to two, qualitatively different and non-overlapping ways of experiencing. I first lighted upon Kelly’s Construct Theory (Bannister and Fransella, 1971) as a way into this. As a clinical psychologist working in a setting (a psychiatric rehabilitation service) that enabled me to offer CBT for psychosis to people who had long sought to make sense of their experience, but until then had been denied therapy, I was struck by the way the psychotic experience matched the spiritual literature with which I was familiar. Coming across Peter Chadwick’s book, ‘Borderline’ (Chadwick, 1992) was the catalyst that prompted me to organise my ideas and attempt to publish them. It was Paul Chadwick (no relation of Peter’s!), my then boss, who suggested an edited volume and urged me to contact Gordon Claridge because of the relevance of Schizotypy to my subject. This invaluable advice proved the key. I wrote to all my heroes with the chapter I had prepared, Peter Chadwick, Mike Jackson, Peter Fenwick and many other contributors to the book, and was amazed when they replied, one and all, in the affirmative to my request for chapters. I began to conclude that this was an idea whose time was coming.

Bringing the contributors together as part of that process led to the suggestion of a conference on Psychosis and Spirituality that was made possible by Professor Kingdon and organised by the Southampton University Mental Health Unit’s Education and Development Department. The success of the September 2000 conference led to the second in 2001, both held in or near Winchester, attended by about 60 delegates, with a good mixture of service users/experiencers, professionals and interested others. Both conferences ended with the sense of a conversation that needed to continue. Chris Clarke responded to this by setting up a closed Yahoo psychosis and spirituality discussion list, which flourishes on the World-Wide Web to this day.

**The Psychosis and Spirituality Web Discussion List**

This conversation has displayed respect for the individual’s experience, open-mindedness about interpretation, a bias against dogmatism and a respect for mystery. Time and again, members of the list comment that this is an accepting and supportive place. There are little bursts of real intellectual excitement, but the main function seems to be to hold that space so that it can contain psychosis and spirituality together without judgement and without the need for ultimatum answers, but with real support and companionship through both dark and suffering, and exhilarating times.

Such accounts of experience featured in a special issue of the *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy*, which came out in 2002 (Clarke, 2002).
A final conference, with a wider focus on ‘Ways of Knowing’ was organised by Chris Clarke in Winchester in 2005 (Clarke, 2005). However, that was by no means the end of conferences! Conferences on spirituality, on recovery and spirituality, and even on psychosis and spirituality have abounded over the last few years.

**The UK Spiritual Crisis Network**

Just as our enthusiasm for organising conferences started to wane, the ‘Revisioning Mental Health’ conferences, organised by Catherine Lucas, which started in 2004 took up the baton. Significantly, these three successful conferences led directly to the formation of the Spiritual Crisis Network in the United Kingdom.

Our ultimate vision for the Spiritual Crisis Network (I am a member of the development group) is for a network of groups of people in every locality who could support someone going through a crisis, at the same time as receiving support from each other to provide this. Of course, where the risks are judged to be too great, the individual would be supported to access the local mental health services. At present, only groups exist in a few localities, but our website is up and running, and well used; the email advice line is contacted by one or two people every week, and at least there is evidence of another perspective on such crises for people experiencing them and their carers/supporters. The web address is listed at the end of this book.

Members of the Spiritual Crisis Network have contributed some of the new material in this second edition. The network has a thriving Kundalini Section and a member of the section has added an account of her own experience to House’s (2001) chapter on Kundalini. Other contributors from the network are Sharon Warwick and Janice Hartley. Janice’s contribution to the clinical section gives a striking account of her own experience, uses this as a therapeutic tool to help other people make sense of theirs and incorporates a powerful plea for an alternative to the conventional psychiatric approach.

**An Explosion of Research**

The explosion of research into this subject area that has taken place since 1999 gives me real optimism that the conceptual map is being redrawn. The first edition included all the research I was aware of 10 years ago; Mike Jackson’s comprehensive study of the overlap between spiritual and psychotic experience, and Emmanuelle Peters’ comparisons between diagnosed samples and members of new religious movements. It would be impossible to encompass the field in that way any longer. All I can do is to include examples of some of the most significant and interesting research that I am aware of, namely Caroline Brett’s study, supervised by Peters, of anomalous experiences, and two examples of qualitative research by Sharon Warwick and Roger Waldram.
Rethinking Psychosis

I would like to think that this reconceptualisation of psychosis is set to move beyond a frontier and towards a paradigm shift. In my daily work as a clinical psychologist in an NHS acute mental health hospital, I am constantly confronted with the damage to hope and sense of self that the prevailing conceptualisation of psychosis produces. I am aware that there is a long way to go here, but at least we have started. The research explosion is producing the evidence and we are building on that research to develop new, more valuing and less stigmatising ways of working with people who have received that diagnosis. My prediction is that this new research stream will force those of us who work in the mental health services to look long and hard at how we handle the phenomenon of psychosis.

The conclusions of this research are inescapable. The apparatus of labelling, stigmatising and presenting medication as the only option is creating more and more persistent and serious dysfunctions than it aims to relieve. This research points to a new and more creative conceptualisation and attitude, which in turn can open the door to new and more creative treatment and response. The final, clinical, section of the book explores such responses, again with two new chapters. The first edition opened the door a little way to this new vision. Between the two editions, I have sought to open this debate to a wider audience with the generally accessible, ‘Madness, Mystery and the Survival of God’ (Clarke, 2008). My hope is that this second edition will move the discourse yet further and help to consolidate the new paradigm.