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# Perspectives in Spirituality and Religion In Psychotherapy

Edited by

Richard W. Sears

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## FOREWORD

Edward P. Shafranske, PhD, ABPP

*Perspectives on Spirituality and Religion in Psychotherapy* provides an important resource for clinicians seeking ways to address and to integrate spirituality into psychotherapy. Consistent with the diverse landscape of spiritual experience, the volume presents a wide range of spiritual perspectives and practices, which may be integrated within psychological treatment. Each approach at its core considers the unique ways in which psychology and spirituality conjoin to construct meaning and offer resources to cope with the challenges inherent in human life.

When people suffer, they grasp for the meaning of their distress and may seek psychotherapy to gain an understanding of their life situation and to find the means to alleviate their physical, emotional, and spiritual pain. Jerome Frank (J. D. Frank & J. B. Frank, 1991/1961) characterized such attempts as efforts to counter *demoralization*. Demoralization results from experiences and the attendant attributions that shatter a person's global meaning (Park, 2013). In such a state of mind one's ontological moorings are compromised and daily life worsens as stress, anxiety, depression, and meaninglessness may ensue – the person is in dire straits. Frank considered that all psychotherapies involve a process in which meanings are transformed and mastery is gained by “providing the patient with a conceptual scheme that explains symptoms and supplies the rationale and procedure for overcoming them” (J. D. Frank & J. B. Frank, 1961/1991, p. 48). In noncrisis situations as well, meaning also becomes an important focus as therapists work within the patient's assumptive world to seek solutions to life difficulties.

Religion and spirituality similarly contribute to the quest to make sense of life, particularly when facing challenges and disappointments, major and minor. In particular, religion and spirituality offer the means or pathways to cope with adversity. While an affinity appears to ex-

ist between psychological and religious/spiritual (R/S) approaches, spiritual pathways are unique given their sacred character (Pargament, Mahoney, Shafranske, Exline, & Jones, 2013). Spiritual pathways locate experience within a transcendent context and offers avenues to the sacred (however defined). Taken in this light, psychological and spiritual approaches are different yet interrelated. Further, psychotherapies may usefully integrate religious and spiritual perspectives and practices, since such approaches may be better suited to address “the meaninglessness of suffering” (as Nietzsche put it), which is at the heart of acute human suffering. And as Pargament et al. (2013) observed, religious and spiritual pathways or tools are “especially tailored to the struggle with human limitations and finitude” (p. 7). Psychological approaches that incorporate a spiritual dimension, consistent with the faith commitments, preferences, and informed consent of the client, offer a holistic perspective drawing together psychological and spiritual resources.

In addition to the aforementioned theoretical argument for bringing together psychotherapeutic and spiritual sources of healing, a review of works in anthropology and sociology and particularly in the psychology of religion and spirituality (Pargament, Exline, & Jones, 2013; Pargament, Mahoney, & Shafranske, 2013) offers further support. Given the incontrovertible evidence of the importance of religion and spirituality (R/S) in the lives of many people (e.g., about 53% of Americans report religion to be very important and 26% fairly important [Gallup, 2010]; see also Ellison & McFarland [2013]), its impact on health (Masters & Hooker, 2012; Dein, 2013; Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012) and on coping (Gall & Guirgus-Younger, 2013; Pargament, 2007; Pargament, Falb, Ano, & Wachholtz, 2013), applied clinical psychology, and other allied mental health disciplines have increasingly focused their attention on the interface of mental health, religion, and spirituality.

In addition to the support of integration based on the empirical literature, professional values call for appreciation of religion and spirituality as features of diversity (see for example the American Psychological Association’s [APA] *Guidelines for Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists*, 2002) and the necessity of taking these features into consideration when offering treatment. APA’s adoption in 2005 of evidence-based practice in psychology as policy (2006) requires psychologists to take into consideration “patient characteristics, culture, and preferences” (p. 273). In light of the empirical evidence of the relevance of R/S for

mental health and the importance of offering culturally sensitive treatment (which incorporates R/S as expressions of diversity), clinicians (no matter their discipline or theoretical orientation) are compelled to address spirituality. This requires not only knowledge and training, but more fundamentally requires the clinician to adopt a stance of cultural humility and to gain awareness of their assumptions as well as any biases or prejudices that might result in spiritual intolerance (Pargament, 2007).

One of the many contributions of this volume is diversity of perspectives offered, which immediately prompts self-reflection and (hopefully) instills curiosity about the multiverse of ways in which spirituality impacts individuals and the therapeutic process. Undoubtedly, the perspectives and information contained in many of these chapters will resonate with the reader's existing beliefs, and other chapters may spark interest in learning something new and broadening appreciation of diversity. The editors and contributors offer insights into diverse communities that are too often neglected, which illustrate the impacts of religious and spiritual experience as cultural features. There is also attention to challenges faced by individuals when their values and identity variables conflict with religious tradition or authority. Much of the literature concerning religious and spiritual perspectives in psychotherapy has focused on potential benefits in integration; however, it is important to keep in mind that outcomes are not universally beneficial. Spiritual struggles and strains can ensue (Exline, 2013; Exline & Rose, 2013).

Evidence-based practice also requires psychologists (and is a useful perspective for other mental health practitioners) to develop familiarity with the scientific literature and to develop specialized expertise in the integration of spiritual perspectives and resources and treatment. Given the general lack of exposure to this competence area in graduate education and training (Shafranske & Cummings, 2013), thoughtful self-reflection, private study, participation in continuing education, and consultation provide the avenues to develop skills required to initiate integration ethically and within the scope of professional practice. This text provides a resource that contributes to such continuing education. It may be useful when reading this volume to reflect on the following questions posed by Richards (Gonsiorek et al., 2009, p. 389) to stimulate self-reflection and facilitate metacompetence:

1. Do I have the ability to create a spiritually safe and affirming therapeutic environment for my clients?

2. Do I have the ability to conduct an effective religious and spiritual assessment of my clients?
3. Do I have the ability to use or encourage religious and spiritual interventions, if indicated, in order to help clients access the resources of their faith and spirituality during treatment and recovery?
4. Do I have the ability to effectively consult and collaborate with, and when needed, refer to clergy and other pastoral professionals?

In addition to providing a resource to enhance appreciation of diversity and to introduce the variety of ways of integrating R/S into psychological treatment, this text contributes to the gradual shifting of worldview occurring within psychology (and to some extent in the human sciences more generally). Such a shift involves the incorporation of a postmaterialist perspective so that phenomena that lie outside of the bounds of empiricism may be considered. Such efforts involve offering “the widest possible aperture for the apprehension of human meaning and the offer of compassion” (Shafranske & Sperry, 2005, p. 351). Studies in the psychology of religion and spirituality as well as clinical handbooks (such as this volume) force a broadening of our appreciation of “the nature of things,” particularly when considering the nature of the transcendent in human existence. Lisa Miller (2013) put the issue well, “Spiritual psychology as a scientific discipline, taken seriously, authentically, and with academic freedom, naturally brings forth a reexamination of psychology’s core ontological assumptions . . .” (p. 1) and she goes on to say, “Postmaterialist spiritual psychology can live alongside and cross-fertilize work conducted from a materialist perspective; the two are not exclusive, and both are true” (p. 2). Such is the case in applied psychology as we consider the integration of psychology, religion, and spirituality. This volume illuminates the possibilities of such integration.

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# INTRODUCTION

Richard W. Sears and Alison Niblick

Though still an emerging field of scientific study, the topic of spirituality is finally gaining more attention among professionals. Scientists like Andrew Newburg (2012) have even focused their careers on the study of spirituality and the brain. Newburg (2012) notes that before 1990, there were roughly 25 to 50 scientific papers published each year on spirituality and health. Since 2000, more than 400 papers are published in this area per year, demonstrating that religion and spirituality have a measurable impact on mental and physical health. Publications on the relationship of spirituality and religion to psychotherapy now abound in the fields of psychology, counseling, and social work. From the American Psychological Association alone, there are currently over 2,700 book chapters, journal articles, films, and videos available from such leading experts as Edward Shafranske, Lillian Comas-Diaz, Scott Richards, Allen Bergin, Carol Falender, Mark McMinn, Ken Pargament, Siang-Yang Tan, and others that address aspects of the integration of religion or spirituality into psychotherapy. Even APA's Society for the Psychology of Religion and Psychotherapy (Division 36) had its origin in the mid-1940s. However, there is still not much attention given to this area in professional training programs and workshops.

Several years ago, I (RS) was asked by Dr. Eve Wolf to write a book chapter on spirituality in psychotherapy for the next edition of *Innovations in Clinical Practice* (Sears, 2011). During my background research, I quickly discovered that my experience in graduate school, where we seldom discussed spirituality and religion, was not unique. To her credit, Dr. Wolf, in her role as Academic Dean at Wright State University School of Professional Psychology, then asked me to teach

an elective on that topic to the doctoral students. You are now reading the product of that course.

Perhaps as a holdover from the common aphorism, “one does not discuss spirituality in public,” some might have been concerned about teaching a course on spirituality and religion to a group of doctoral students. One might wonder if there would be enough interest, or if it would be too difficult to discuss such topics in a civilized manner among diverse students. Indeed, I (RS) recently was part of a panel discussion on this topic for a local psychological association, and the facilitator was very concerned about the potential for conflict. The flyer for the program was full of cautious language, asking attendees to be respectful and to avoid disparaging comments.

However, open dialogue and specialized training on this topic is crucial for our field. If we, as educated mental health professionals, are unwilling to feel uncomfortable, engage in difficult dialogue, and risk appearing ignorant or biased, what hope is there for the rest of society? At a very minimum, we must be willing to be sensitive to issues of spirituality that may be relevant to the therapeutic encounter.

Twenty students signed up for that elective course. Though no one was expected to reveal personal information, the students often freely engaged in very open dialogue and discussion, despite very different personal backgrounds. Students in the class identified as atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, Christian, earth-centered, Jewish, Hindu, Zoroastrian, and Muslim. The anchoring question, that set the context for such rich dialogue, was, “What do I need to consider when working with someone from this background?” Hence, arguments about which spiritual viewpoint was “correct” became irrelevant to the discussions.

It was challenging, if not impossible, to cover every important topic in a 10-week course, so the emphasis was on process more than content. Thus, the course focused more on how clinicians approach and work with these issues, with mindfulness of clinical and ethical considerations, rather than on specific details of spiritual or religious traditions. The course objectives were simple, asking students to (a) learn about multiple spiritual and religious systems and how they impact psychotherapy; (b) explore their own understanding of spirituality and how it might impact the clients they serve; (c) explore in depth the spiritual topic of their choice and how it impacts psychotherapy; and (d) present the results of their investigations to classmates and possibly the professional community. Class topics included the importance of spirituality

in psychotherapy, assessment of spirituality, therapist self-awareness, the impact of therapist beliefs on psychotherapeutic processes, Eastern traditions (Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Taoism), Western traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, earth-centered, and “New Age”), meditation, rituals, prayer, spirituality without religion, spirituality and existential psychotherapy, and end-of-life issues.

The final assignment was for the students to choose an area of interest to them and create a book chapter, with the option of becoming part of this publication if they chose to do so. One of the authors, Alison Niblick, also became co-editor, which served the project well due to her editing skills, education, and training. Later, several other developing professionals joined the project, adding even more perspectives. Dr. Jennifer Scott also joined us, lending her expertise in standards of professional writing, which helped bring the project to completion.

Because by definition, most students are new to the field, there can be a tendency to become enthusiastic about a particular point of view, without the depth of experience to provide the broad context of the entire subject matter. However, we hope that the perspectives provided by this text will still prove valuable to stimulate interest, dialogue, and mainstream discussion of these important topics. The value of this work, while not comprehensive on the broad topic of religion and spirituality, is that each chapter is written by someone with some personal experience with their topic, rather than a strictly academic perspective. It is important for therapists to understand the feelings and beliefs of their clients, and a parallel process can be observed in the tone of these chapters.

Because most of this book was written by developing professionals, there will likely be some errors, omissions, generalizations, and biases. For example, use of terms such as “East” and “West” are quickly losing their distinction in our era of globalization. I (RS) remember an occasion when two Catholic priests from India asked me about traditional meditation practices in my office, and I was struck by the contrast of my Shiva statue over the shoulder of my guests in their priestly vestments. Even if one were to use the term “Asian,” there is a vast difference among the history, beliefs, and practices of individuals from India, China, Laos, Nepal, and other countries on the Asian continent. Moreover, there is great variety among individuals within these cultures and their traditions. Even to use the word “tradition” negates the reality of an ever-evolving way of doing things.



Similarly, we are aware of, own, and apologize in advance for the microaggressions committed by not addressing certain groups in this text. There were only so many perspectives present in the class at the time the assignment was given. These were not intentional omissions, but rather represent the diversity present in the class at the time. For example, the chapter addressing lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues in spirituality does not consider issues pertaining to transgender and other gender and sexual diversities (GSD). The chapter on Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in couples therapy focuses on heterosexual relationships, rather than on the broad spectrum of romantic relationships. Also, there are many spiritual and religious groups that are not addressed here, groups that are unfortunately too often glossed over in the literature.

Despite these significant limitations, we feel that it is crucial to keep dialogues going, as with all issues of diversity and social justice. It is better to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from them, than to keep silent until one is totally knowledgeable and comfortable, for that time may never come. Just as in other areas of diversity, ignoring the issues only perpetuates problems. We must be brave enough to continuously address these topics, even if we occasionally fumble and have our feelings hurt or offend others. Better to offend and make amends in an attempt at understanding than to willfully perpetuate ignorance and biases.

Although we have carefully attempted to edit each chapter to reduce bias, ultimately we felt it was important to allow authors to express their particular points of view. Hence, these perspectives do not necessarily reflect the attitudes, beliefs, or opinions of the editors.

For more scholarly depth, we suggest the reader follow the research and training opportunities provided by such authors as Edward Shafranske, who kindly wrote the foreword to this book. To gain a “big picture” perspective on these topics from fresh eyes, we invite the reader to delve into the words and experiences of the writers that follow. We hope that this volume will spark your interest in exploring this important area of diversity in greater depth, and that you have the courage, as these authors did, to stretch the boundaries of your comfort zone in order to better serve your clients.

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# PSYCHOLOGICAL OBSTACLES ON THE SPIRITUAL PATH

Richard W. Sears

*This chapter is based on a presentation given in January 2008, in Delhi, India, at the World Congress on Psychology and Spirituality.*

It may be helpful to begin by sharing my background and how that led to my interest in this subject. Originally, at the age of 15, I began to study the martial arts. The man who would become my teacher, Stephen K. Hayes, wrote extensively on the martial traditions of Asia and frequently referred to the spiritual foundations that have been a part of the martial arts for hundreds of years (Hayes, 1984). At first, I was much more interested in the physical techniques, being a young teenager, but I slowly developed more and more interest in Eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism and Taoism. At the age of 19, I decided to study Buddhism with my teacher's teacher, and by the age of 21, my Buddhist teacher decided it would be good to ordain me. So, at a relatively young age, I was a black belt and a Buddhist priest. In my twenties, I ran a martial arts and meditation center, and there were many students who came to see me to study these traditional systems.

However, I found that many people, perhaps because I had some kind of authority, began asking me about their personal lives. They asked me about such things as relationship issues, financial concerns, and mental health issues. Fortunately, I had enough humility to know that I could not fix these things, and maybe at least a few of them benefited from me just listening to them. My experience has been that many spiritual traditions attract people with a history of trauma, anxiety, and other psychological issues, perhaps hoping to find some healing from their distress. I quickly realized, however, that as profound as these spiritual and martial art traditions were, they were developed before the problems of modern society arose. So this is what drew my interest in modern clinical psychology, and I decided to go to graduate school to earn a doctoral degree. I am fascinated by the current interest of

scientists in Eastern traditions, particularly in meditation, and I am also fascinated that an increasing number of spiritual individuals are seeking insights from psychology. I believe this is a unique time in history.

## RELIGION AND SCIENCE

When one talks about the Eastern wisdom traditions, typically one is referring to Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism. Although these are often called religions, they are different from what many people think of as religion in comparison to Western belief systems. The Eastern traditions may be considered more akin to psychologies or philosophies rather than belief systems and focus on spiritual and self-development. They investigate the nature of the self, that is, who we are, how we perceive ourselves, and how we relate to the universe around us. These traditions also address how meaning in life is created. They focus on the suprapersonal or transpersonal aspects of our experience, our sense of connection to a grander scheme of things, our feelings of interdependence with the world and the universe around us (Welwood, 2002). However, the teachings of these traditions are deeply intertwined with the culture of the societies in which they developed. For this reason, I believe modern society has often dismissed the profound and insightful teachings found within these systems because modern researchers are turned off by the older customs and beliefs that remain part of these traditions.

In the science of psychology, the emphasis is on the scientific method. This method is about empirical validation of hypotheses and theories, testing things out and making sure they can make reliable predictions. However, clinical practice involves some art in addition to science. The artfulness lies in knowing when and how to apply the scientific principles in a manner that will be helpful to the suffering individual, family, couple, or organization with whom the psychologist is working.

Neuropsychology, or neuroscience, involves the scientific study of brain structures and functions. Interestingly, the more advanced we become in learning about the brain, the more our conclusions begin to sound like premises of the old Eastern wisdom traditions. For example, we cannot locate a place in the brain that we can call the center of our

consciousness or sense of self. It appears that the sense of self emerges from multiple, ever-changing processes (Carlson, 2007; Crick, 1994).

Clinical psychology focuses on interpersonal and intrapersonal issues. In therapy, our clients are attempting to find some insights into the workings of their own minds, trying to discover how their own thinking and behavior patterns impact how they operate in the world. They are also working to improve their interpersonal relationships; that is, how they relate to coworkers, friends, and family.

Psychology also investigates the mental health disorders that occur in modern society, such as anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, and trauma. Whereas old traditions may have tried to create some larger meaning as to what these disorders represented, modern psychology attempts to understand them from biological and psychological perspectives and attempts to perform careful studies to determine the best ways of resolving these problems.

From a scientific point of view, spirituality is often seen as a form of escape. Individuals who seek religion, for instance, were described by Freud as looking for some kind of cosmic parent figure to make them feel secure (Freud, 1963). People may also seek spirituality to escape the pain of past traumas in their lives and to try to find some meaning for all the suffering they have endured. Some seek spirituality through a desire to impress other people by becoming spiritually accomplished and gaining some type of authority. Yet others who train in Eastern wisdom traditions only desire to escape ego through the desire of the ego. In Eastern wisdom traditions, the ego is seen as an illusion, because we are all interdependent, and the ego arises as an extra construct that is over and above reality. Because it is constantly changing, the ego is not seen as having any reality of its own. Paradoxically, there is often a lot of ego involved in the desire to rid oneself of one's own ego. This process may become a game of "my ego is more transcendent than your ego."

From a spiritual perspective, those who are attached to the scientific method may also be seen as escaping. Science may provide a kind of structure to foster meaning in a person's life. Sometimes, science can be a way to avoid existential issues, such as the inevitability of death, whether or not the universe has any meaning, and what the role of choice and responsibility is in our lives. Attachment to science may also be a reaction to feeling disillusioned with organized religion. In the age of instant media coverage, popular religious figures have let many people

down, and the dogmatic teachings of some religions have not kept up with scientific discoveries. This may lead some people to seek out science as their way of answering spiritual questions.

I believe it is important for individuals to explore both the realm of science and the realm of meaning. One's psychological issues can create problems on the spiritual path, as can thinking that one does not have any psychological issues. It is easy to be holy when one is in a monastery, and it is easy to be compassionate when everyone surrounding you gives you attention and admiration as a spiritual teacher. I believe it is also important to be psychologically healthy and emotionally mature in order to interact with other people in the world and help them in a productive way, rather than in a reactionary or self-serving way.

### POTENTIAL OBSTACLES

In discussing some potential obstacles on the spiritual path, I will borrow the idea of the "three poisons" from the teachings of Buddhism. One of the three poisons is greed, or what we might call "chasing after." This obstacle involves such things as using spirituality to seek comfort, trying to collect spiritual experiences, and trying to collect books and initiations.

Another obstacle on the spiritual path is fear, or what we might call "pushing away." This would be a tendency to use spirituality to avoid uncomfortable subjects and criticism, and may express itself as denigrating other spiritual paths or the scientific method.

The third potential obstacle is ignorance. This could manifest itself as a lack of awareness of one's own functioning, such as how one establishes and maintains interpersonal relationships and how one deals with one's own emotions such as anger. Ignorance may also take the form of not seeking out new opportunities for growth, of resting upon small attainments one has achieved, or in having too much spiritual pride.

One of the paths of Buddhism is known as the Vajrayana, or "diamond path." According to this approach, rather than suppressing obstacles, one can transform psychological issues into enlightenment. The example given traditionally is how the peacock transforms the poisonous substances that it eats into the beautiful colors that manifest in its tail. Psychologists call this process sublimation, where one takes strong emotions, such as lust, and channels them into some productive

activity, such as creating beautiful artwork. The Vajrayana approach is to use all of one's emotions as tools for growth, to see all experiences as opportunities for learning. Even enemies are considered divine beings in disguise, for they are the best teachers of patience and compassion.

Unfortunately, people often confuse being spiritual with being polluted by one of the three poisons. For example, some people may have difficulty connecting with others, which could be a manifestation of the obstacle of "pushing away" or fear. However, those people may have a feeling of "being above it all," believing that they possess the quality of equanimity, when in fact they are hiding behind the idea of spiritual attainment. For this reason, the Vajrayana is called the "dangerous" path, and having a teacher is considered vital to avoid self-deception.

### **SPIRITUALITY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY**

In clinical psychology, the therapist can help clients face what they are avoiding, and provide perspective. Anxiety is a common presenting issue. When people feel anxious, they want something to take away that anxiety. There are large numbers of individuals who have been abused as children or adults and have had very traumatic experiences. As many trauma survivors and helping professionals know, by trying to avoid the anxiety that comes up from remembering these experiences, these symptoms are made worse. In the long term, avoidance exacerbates anxiety symptoms. Anxiety can then manifest as intrusive thoughts that will not go away or as nightmares that relive the traumatic event. An individual who has been abused while growing up may seek comfort in religion – the comfort they never got from their caregivers. Alternatively, they may grow disillusioned with religion, disappointed that there was not some supreme being or higher spiritual truths to save them from the horrible suffering they endured.

Mindfulness meditation is one example of an ancient method with modern applications (Denton & Sears, 2009). By turning toward and sitting with our anxiety (which is called exposure in clinical psychology), the anxiety response can be processed and extinguished.

I believe that we must attain liberation through integration. Only through healing our ego, our sense of who we are, can we transcend our ego and attain some form of enlightenment or spiritual peace. We



must heal our past hurts, so that they no longer influence our present choices in a negative way. I believe that in addition to spiritual attainment, we must achieve psychological maturity. One must have an integrated ego before that ego can be transcended. This is especially true if we want to actively engage with the world and if we want to truly help other people by giving them what is best for them rather than what we believe others need based on our own lacks. We must understand that we are all connected, even though we feel ourselves to be separate individuals. We are interdependent with the environment around us, with nature, and with the other human beings who grow our food, make our clothing, and pave our roadways. This awareness can help create a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. We must also be very careful not to confuse a lack of turmoil in our lives with enlightenment. If we are in meditation and achieve a clear and peaceful mind state, sitting by ourselves on a mountaintop, it may not necessarily be enlightenment. I believe an enlightened person should be able to engage with the world and deal with the problems of everyday life, in the world with helping hands.

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