

VARIETIES OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

This educational CAPPE module is part iv in section III:

Theories of Human functioning and Spirituality

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Introduction

The metaphor of a soul yearning to connect with its home base has been a repetitive theme in conceptualizing human spirituality. In the religious sentiment, according to William James' classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*ⁱ, the visible world is embedded in an invisible spiritual universe from which human life derives its chief meaning and purpose. In a similar vein, Paul Tillich (1957) expressed the essence of religion in the concept of a person's *ultimate concern*, which is further defined as the soul's *passion for the infinite*. Ultimate concerns also stand out in the topographical metaphor of *theological worlds*. Paul Jones (1989) coined this concept to describe the spiritual striving in a theological world constituted by an *obsessio* (dilemma) that is attuned to a contrasting *epiphania* (resolution). There are diverse theological worlds and the "rhythm" in each one is found in the interplay between the respective poles of *obsessio* and *epiphania*. A variety of spiritualities thus emerges in the following polar dyads: separation and reunion, conflict and vindication, emptiness and fulfillment, condemnation and forgiveness, and suffering and endurance.

This variety of theological worlds reflects the sweeping scope in current definitions of spirituality where the spiritual quest covers vast territory: for unity and reconciliation, for acceptance and love, for attainment of one's potential, for fulfillment of one's true vocation, for ultimate meaning and transcendence, for connection and community, for the courage to be and to endure. The practice of spiritual care requires the openness and curiosity of a William James in savoring the "varieties" of religious and spiritual experience. Rather than being confined to one theoretically dominant or personally preferred standpoint, caregivers need multiple perspectives to join with people as they share their spiritual/theological orientation and concerns. A cross-spiritual spectrum will facilitate greater flexibility in identifying the core questions that are being raised as well as locate the particular theological world in which these questions reside.

Three Perspectives in Spiritual Care and Counselling

This module differentiates three distinctive spiritualities that have been prominent in the history and practice of care. The proposed outline of three distinctive spiritual territories is neither comprehensive nor final. Furthermore, these spiritual perspectives cannot be sharply demarcated one from the other nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive. Yet in spiritual care encounters one perspective often takes dominance. The three perspectives in this module vary in context and can be arranged in an historical sequence, tracing the emergence of a variety of meaning worlds prevalent in Western society:

- ***reconciliation***

This perspective grounds spirituality in relationships. It is prominent in the world of religion. The Church's "ministry of reconciliation," based on the "good news" of God's acceptance, is to be realized in a community of love for the other and care for the world. Compassion is what connects us to each other, including the stranger, and is the central message that connects the major religions. Grace and forgiveness is also present in a non-religious spirituality through the experience of grateful surprise. It is the grace that comes unannounced and uninvited, outside human control or choice. Such are the bright moments when, in spite of everything, life is good, accepting and forgiving.

- ***restoration***

The spirituality of the "care of the soul," seeking the restoration of the self is highlighted in the world of psychology in charting the developmental process towards self-realization and through the practice of psychotherapy in the healing of the self. It is prominent in the central Jungian concept of *individuation* and the focus on *self-actualization* in humanistic psychology since the 1960's. The restoration of the self towards a *cohesive self* stands out in the psychoanalytic school of Self Psychology starting in the 1970's. Another major development in psychology in the 1970's that has shaped the practice of spiritual care, Family Systems theory, places the process of *self-differentiation* at the core of healthy interpersonal interaction.

- ***resilience***

The perspective of the infinite adaptability of the human spirit when challenged in adversity spans a broad, interdisciplinary spectrum in the world of the social sciences. It is set against the backdrop of a violence-ridden world and stress-saturated day-to-day living. The 1980 edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) included "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder" as a discrete diagnostic category. Initially related to the debilitating effects of the Vietnam War, the diagnosis is presently stretched to include the impact of poverty, child abuse, loss and grief, infidelity, discrimination, domestic violence, natural disasters, accidents, physical decline and disabilities, among many other traumatizing experiences. Resilience is the bright sparkle in the darkness of despair, highlighting the intrinsic penchant of the human spirit to visualize hope and secure a path through the obstacles of life.

Following is a more elaborate description of each of these three spiritualities:

1. The Perspective of Reconciliation

Reconciliation with God and consequently with oneself is prominent in many of the case studies recounted in William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The chapter on *The Sick Soul* is rooted in James' own experience of feeling spiritually forsaken. The book's personal narratives come from troubled souls in desperate search for salvation. The dominant *theological world* is constructed by the dialectic of condemnation and forgiveness. The case studies generally paint condemnation as an overwhelming sense of sin and guilt with resulting feelings of helplessness and despair. James describes this as

the dilemma of *the divided self*: the sense that there is an evil inner core that separates us from what we aspire to.

Although Freud was not a friend of the world of religion, his psychology parallels the religious version of the dilemma of a divided self. Psychoanalytic theory sees the self divided between the unconscious and the conscious. The unconscious represents the biological, antisocial forces of the instincts that crave for instant gratification. Consciousness represents a higher level of mental awareness attuned to social sensitivity and a moral order. The split between the conscious and the unconscious is initially experienced as dividing the self into two contrary forces locked in adversarial tension. Repression is the line of defense that cuts the self into two incompatible territories to be kept apart.

This psychoanalytic perspective readily translates into the language of Jewish-Christian religion. For Freud the story of the fall into sin originates in the archaic family drama of the *oedipal* conflict. Original sin stems from the act of transgressing into the forbidden territory of desiring what belongs to the father. This sin evokes the father's anger and the child's guilt and fear of terminal punishment. The resolution to this dilemma is to be pursued in the search for the unification of the self. For Freud this is achieved through exploring one's unconscious world in the presence of an accepting, non-judging analyst. Hopefully the psychoanalytic process of self-examination will lead to a unified self in owning the duplicity implicit in being human.

In contrast, William James' *Varieties* speaks of a religion of deliverance: "the man must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life" (p.139). Reconciliation culminates in the liberating moment when guilt dissolves into the assurance of forgiveness. James cites a classic case example rooted in Reformation theology through the testimony of Martin Luther who after the experience of God's grace exhibited an almost callous disregard for sin:

"When I was a monk," he says, "I thought that I was utterly cast away, if at any time I felt the lust of the flesh: that is to say, if I felt any evil motion, fleshly lust, wrath, hatred, or envy against any brother, I assayed many ways to help to quiet my conscience, but it would not be; for the concupiscence and lust of my flesh did always return, so that I could not rest, but was continually vexed with these thoughts: This or that sin thou hast committed: thou art infected with envy, with impatience, and such other sins: therefore thou art entered into this holy order in vain, and all thy good works are unprofitable. But if then I had rightly understood these sentences of Paul: 'The flesh lusteth contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit contrary to the flesh; and these two are one against another, so that ye cannot do the things that ye would do,' I should not have so miserably tormented myself, but should have thought and said to myself, as now commonly I do, 'Martin, thou shalt not be utterly be without sin (p.113).

Object Relations psychology, at times referred to as “relational psychoanalysis,” presents human emotional suffering as a case of “bad object relations,” conflicted interpersonal relationships that have been internalized and block one’s connectedness to life. Ronald Fairbairn described therapy as a search for salvation “from his past, from bondage to his bad objects, from the burden of guilt, and from spiritual death.”ⁱⁱ He saw psychotherapy as a spiritual process of “exorcising” bad object relations. His colleague in object-relations analysis and former pastor, Harry Guntrip, believed that being human involves “an absolute need to be able to relate in fully personal terms to an environment that we feel relates beneficently to us,” and that “religion has always stood for the saving power of the good object relationship.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Commenting on pastoral care functions from church history, Clebsch and Jaekle (1975) include *reconciling* as it “seeks to re-establish broken relationships between man and fellow man and between man and God” (p.33), employing the two modes of forgiveness and discipline. Beyond the Christian community, reconciliation stands as a universal spiritual care practice and discipline present in all the major religions. In our present generation we have become critically aware that the reconciliation between persons and God is intertwined with the natural environment of the earth. Reconciliation comes in linking the healing of ourselves with the healing of our planet.^{iv}

Related Theological/Spiritual Concepts

- *grace*
- *forgiveness*
- *acceptance*
- *love*
- *community*

Additional concepts?

2. The Perspective of Restoration

In current psychoanalytic practice, the school of Self Psychology discovered that many clients do not demonstrate anymore the classic neurotic struggle with inhibitions and guilt (Gabbard, 1990, 37-42). In contrast, many contemporary clients are troubled by chronic feelings of low self-worth, with an emotional dependency on unflagging support and admiration (Kohut, 1971). These "narcissistic" strivings originate in a pre-oedipal stage of human development, located in the neediness of the small child for constant affirmation and re-assurance from the parent. Deficits in attending to a child's needs for acknowledgement leave a legacy of enduring feelings of left empty and insecure in the world. The spiritual impetus is towards restoration of the self in overcoming these nurturing deficits from the past.

Self Psychology has become increasingly prominent in the practice of spiritual care. There is evidence that often current religious experiences are no longer primarily defined by guilt and the search for forgiveness. Pastoral theologian Donald Capps, in his

book *The depleted self: sin in a narcissistic age*, refutes the damning connotations of narcissism in his empathic description of the current dominant spiritual malaise: "...we seem chronically depleted, doubtful of our worth, emotionally hungry, and highly attuned and sensitive to shame. Moments of elation and satisfaction cannot be enjoyed or even trusted because we know that soon the bubble will burst, the joy will dissipate, and the life will go out of us, leaving us, once again, feeling empty and depleted (1993, p.36).

Questions

- Does your experience support that current practices of care encounter more often feelings of emptiness than burdens of guilt?
- In the practice of care is it possible to rank the significance of the following in a person's spirituality?
 - forgiveness of one's sins
 - validation of one's life
 - affirmation of one's essential beliefs
- What are the kind of questions in a personal interview that differentiate the two spiritualities of reconciliation and restoration?

A Case Illustration

In a personal narrative entitled *A Mirror and Two Roses* ^v the author identifies three critical events that can be described and summarized in the following account:

It started when an old friend crossed his path, looked at him and said: "You're fat!" Inwardly he reacted with indignation: "How dare you tell me that? I'm not fat! Who are you to tell me that?" The second event came after a night of drinking in a solitary hotel room on a New Year's Eve. The next morning, ready to check out, he looked in the mirror: "I didn't recognize what I saw. There was a real split, I guess, between my inner self and the self that the outside world could see. I didn't like what I saw. I saw a fat person...I didn't see a healthy person. I didn't see a happy person." This mirror image shook him up in a profound way. He recounts the moment that he thought: "You're a smart person. What can you do to make yourself feel better?" He continues: "I had never exercised regularly, but I started walking every day. Then I began running. After a year I was still at it, running six miles at least twice a week. I also started eating healthier foods, and it worked. I slimmed down, and people noticed and complimented me. I stopped drinking heavily. During the same time I began feeling more confident and taking initiative in the business where I worked..."

For Reflection

In the spirituality of reconciliation William James speaks of the "divided self" as an evil inner core that separates us from what we aspire to. In the above case report there is also a divided self called "a real split." In differentiating these two divisions/splits, how would you respond to the following questions:

- How do you see the difference between the two kinds of a “divided self”?
- How can this difference accentuate the essence of these two respective spiritualities?
- Are the two different divisions/splits mutually exclusive?
- The core metaphor in the case report is the mirror reflecting how others see him. How do you see this significant in a person’s spiritual growth?

The author of the above case report does not see his personal transformation as a religious conversion. For others, the experience of becoming who you really are, marks a deeply spiritual experience. In a story entitled *Awakening*,^{vi} a woman reflects on this transformative moment in her personal awareness:

Then one day I suddenly felt a sense of presence about myself that I had never felt before. I knew that the way I was living was not right - that there was more, and most that there was more to me. I had been living a part of myself, but a part that was a hazy sort of person who moved through life and did things well, without a strong awareness or consciousness. That one day, I just became very aware of this. I just felt this presence of a real self within me...I know that there is something I’m destined to do, that there is a greater purpose for me. That doesn’t mean I am going to move the earth or do something profound, but it is profound in the sense that I have found my place on earth. I have made that connection with God. I’m just a person walking around here on earth. God is within me, and I have to pay more attention to the godliness that is really truly me. There’s something specific that I’m here for.

Related Theological/Spiritual Concepts

- *Imago Dei*
- *incarnational theology*
- *self identity*
- *vocation*
- *growing a self*
- *developing one’s talents*
- *personal awareness/discernment*
- *integrity/authenticity*

Additional Concepts?

3. The Perspective of Resilience

Though a perennial human quality, resilience is a relatively new perspective in the field of therapy. Much of the clinical literature has focused on individual pathology and family dysfunction to be countered by clever therapy strategies designed to overcome client difficulties and resistance. Current collaborative therapies emphasize a shift in

perspective from deficits to resources, from damage to challenge. Some studies have explored how people in hostile environments and circumstances not only survived but actually gained in inner strength and ingenuity (Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

A story appropriately entitled *Trampoline*^{vii} depicts the human agility of bouncing back from the traumas and trials of life. The author recounts how as a young gymnastics trampoline teacher he inadvertently landed on his head after demonstrating a double back flip. He damaged his spinal cord and faced the prospect of being paralyzed from the neck down. As he tells the story: "In a split second, I went from being a very, very active person - one who needed twenty-eight hours a day to get everything done and running full blast driving here and there and going everywhere all the time- to just not being able to move." The personal narrative is interspersed with the following resilience signals:

- *I began thinking "What are my options now?"*
- *It was about a week afterward that I first really put it into words when I was talking with one of the nurses, that it was like I was starting my life all over again, being born all over again, except this time my mind was fully developed and I'd be learning to live all over again.*
- *Everything, virtually everything, that I had been doing on my life, I was going to have to put on the back bookshelf of my mind and be a resource to draw from for problem solving later on in life.*
- *Just start anew and take it one step at a time. The first ones are going to be small, baby steps, and then maybe some larger ones, and then maybe a break through or bigger steps, or maybe a step backward.*
- *My spiritual grounding was very helpful. I knew that there was a bigger picture...God would use it in some way that I had no idea of at that time. I knew that there was a plan for this in some way, and it would turn out to be for the best.*
- *The slowing down of my lifestyle allowed me to see a lot more of the beauty in the world, just to take time to see and to analyze it. To see people and not judge them on a quick first impression, not judge them for what they do right then, but to see them more compassionately in a longer-term picture. It makes for a whole lot nicer world.*
- *One of my little hobbies is writing poems.*
- *I really try to be positive, see the positive side of anything that's going on. My spirituality is deeper and more enhanced.*

The above profile illustrates the dynamics of a resilient spirit. The pieces shape a collage of a unique response to suffering. In contrast to being overwhelmed by feelings of despair and resentment, there is an override of defiant hope and steady endurance. Endurance in resilience is not just a passive quality but can generate protest and social action. In the context of physical and sexual family violence or abuse of power in society, resilience often is at the core of the narratives of survival and resistance. Poling cites courageous stories of women's active resilience in response to abuse and points to Jesus' resistance to abusive powers: "For many resilient spirits through the ages, Jesus has been an inspiring

figure of hope in the midst of evil.” (Poling 1991, 35) Others have identified resilience as the outstanding feature in Jewish spirituality (Wolin, 1999).

Men and women are called to enduring hope. True hope is not based on the ebb and flow of our feelings. Nor does it come from success in life. True hope – which means the hope that endures and sustains us – is based on God’s call and command. We are called to hope. It is a command: a command to resist death. It is a call to divine life.
Jurgen Moltmann.

Reflection

How can you respond to the following questions: ^{viii}

- Is there something like a *call* to hope?
- Can we actually be *commanded* to hope?
- Is hope a *duty*?
- Can we in the practice of spiritual care extend the call to hope?
- What is the difference between encourage hope and command hope?

Human resilience often is found in unlikely places such as chronic care facilities. O'Connor & Meakes studied forgiveness and resentment among people with a major disability that permanently confines them to institutional care, their restrictions both demonstrated and defied by a wheelchair. Surprisingly their research found that forgiveness is high and resentment is low (2001, 297-311). Resilience comes across as a spirituality of courage in spite of the boundaries of life. Developmentally it draws on adult functions of reality assessment and collaborating in problem-solving. God is not so much a parent, rescuing the child from its miseries, as a faithful companion and a partner in the daily tasks of addressing and challenging the adversities of life.

Related theological/spiritual concepts

- *creativity*
- *hope*
- *courage*
- *defiance*
- *protest*
- *endurance*
- *suffering*
- *lamentation*

Additional concepts?

Practice Applications

The “varieties” in spirituality in this module generate case studies of difference and root the thesis that spiritual care requires a multi-perspectival approach. Table 1 condenses the three spiritualities by highlighting points of differentiation. This table does not pretend to be a comprehensive schema or a tripartite structural theory of spirituality. The focus, rather, is on the practice of spiritual care. Different perspectives pave the pathways that lead to the various "theological worlds" that map people's spiritual experiences. Sensitive caregivers know that when their own theological world does not connect with others, a different perspective can clear common ground. Likewise for counsellors, a specific therapy model may feel awkward in a particular client situation, demonstrating the need for an inclusive framework that matches person and therapy approach. Solution-Focused therapy may fit a resilience situation but is offensive to a "sick soul" seeking grace.

Table 1

THREE SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES

Perspectives	Reconciliation	Restoration	Resilience
<i>theological dialectic</i>	condemnation & forgiveness	emptiness & fulfillment	suffering & endurance
<i>psychosocial dynamic</i>	guilt & acceptance	shame & confirmation	inferiority & resources
<i>psychoanalytic</i>	Oedipal	pre-oedipal	post-oedipal
<i>pathologic</i>	sick soul	depleted self	discouraged spirit
<i>pathogenic</i>	Sin	deficit	damage
<i>theistic image</i>	Father	mother	companion
<i>therapeutic</i>	representative	reflective	reconstructive

Source: revised and adapted from VanKatwyk, 2003, 38.

Therapy models define themselves by their *modus operandi* in their respective styles of communication. Varieties in spiritual experience require varieties in communication, a multi-channel transmission tuned to the varieties of spiritual experience. Therapeutic communication is not of one piece but comes in different shapes as it seeks to accommodate different experiences. Module II, i (*Caring Conversations – Therapeutic Conversations*) links various therapeutic styles of communication to three different roles in spiritual care: *representative*, *reflective* and *reconstructive*. These three categories correspond to the three spiritualities of reconciliation, restoration and resilience:

- The *representative* role focuses on the spiritual caregiver/counselor who brings an authoritative, comforting and trustworthy message. *The Varieties'* descriptions of the *sick soul* emphasize the role of sacred scripture and the guidance of spiritual mentors. The representative style confirms those seeking forgiveness and acceptance. In religious traditions this is generally incorporated in a liturgical or ritual process that restores relations with the Sacred and within the community.

- The *reflective* role does not reflect an external point of reference or locus of control but celebrates the person's special worth and talents through a respectful attending and mirroring presence. This style enhances intimate personal encounters with those seeking growth and validation.
- The *reconstructive* role in communication is collaborating with others in the meaning-making and problem-solving process of day-to-day living, based on the belief that people are open to hope, viewing life and challenging its hardships with creativity, flexibility and determination.

A multi-perspectival approach makes spiritual care a variant of cross-cultural counselling (Augsburger, 1986): the readiness and ability to meet people on their own domain, in the course of their own journey. Such encounters induce a spirit of curiosity in the caregiver, if not a sense of not knowing:

We have been least successful when we felt that a prior understanding, whether from religious studies or personal experience, has given us a head start in comprehending ... The skills most helpful for opening therapy to the spiritual and religious domains have been those for preparing our own selves to meet someone not yet known.

Griffith & Griffith, 2002, 26-27.

For Reflection and Conversation

In view of the above quotation do you think it possible or advisable to construct

- models or varieties of spirituality?
- a hierarchy of spiritualities, with some more profound than others?
- a number of spiritualities that jointly constitute a person's experience?
- a collage of spiritualities that represents your own experience as a caregiver?

This module is a revised version of the chapter: "Cross-Spiritual Therapy" in VanKatwyk, 2003, 29-39.

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NOTES

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- ⁱ Based on his Gifford Lectures on natural religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902.
- ⁱⁱ Quoted in David Wulff, 1991, 334.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Wulff, 335.
- ^{iv} See Howard Clinebell. *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth*.
- ^v Reported in Miller & C'de Baca, 57-60
- ^{vi} Reported in Miller & C'de Baca, 61-65
- ^{vii} Reported in Miller & C'de Baca, 118-123
- ^{viii} See Jurgen Moltman. 1980, 19. *Experiences of God*. Fortress.