We live in a pluralistic society with people engaging in a wide variety of spiritualities and religions. Unless we work in a solely Christian environment as counsellors this fact of plural non-Christian religious and spiritual beliefs or experiences is something which we will encounter in the counselling room. Our encounters with clients can include adherents to the monotheistic religions, polytheistic religions, non-theistic religions, atheism (which could also be argued to be a form of religious belief) and clients who talk about various forms of spiritual practice or experience. A Muslim man comes for bereavement counselling after the death of his mother and begins to talk about religious practices around washing the body after death and how this links to his feelings of grief. A young woman who is struggling with stress at work talks about her growing interest in meditation and wonders if this is something which would be helpful for her stress. This variety of spiritual experience and practice is also mirrored in the variety of belief and practice found in the Christian community. We only need to think about the differences between Pentecostal and Anglo-Catholic church practices to realise that the variety inside one religion or spiritual practice can be just as great as the variety found outside. This means that much of what is said in this article about working with non-Christian religions is also just as relevant for working with the variety found in our Christian faith.

Definitions

Although we all have an intuitive sense of what the words ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ mean, they are notoriously hard concepts to define in a general sense. When people use the word ‘spirituality’ it can cover anything from attendance at religious services, specific practices such as prayer or mediation or it can cover more ambiguous concepts such as meaning, transcendence, wholeness or relatedness. One way of differentiating between religion and spirituality is to think of religion as being focussed on specific institutional or community practices and spirituality as more individual subjective experiences. This helps us to see spirituality as possibly a more common experience than something which is simply attributed to those who attend religious services in whatever form. People can be religious but not spiritual, spiritual but not religious, religious and spiritual or both not religious and not spiritual. We will see all of these possibilities exhibited in counselling clients. Understanding spirituality in this wider sense can help us hear the implicit or hidden spirituality in what clients say as well as the explicit (e.g. talking about their Buddhist beliefs). Examples of this hidden spirituality could be:

- A client who talks about anxiety around dying could also be implicitly talking about their beliefs about life after death.
- A client who is vitriolic about those in power could also be unconsciously angry with a transcendent power, God.
- A client who talks about lack of meaning and purpose in life could be actually be disclosing a hidden spiritual quest.

Being able to see spirituality and religion in a wider perspective can help us to hear wider spiritual themes and experiences in what our client’s present.
Why is religion or spirituality important in counselling?

In the past quarter of a century more and more research has taken place which examines the links between spirituality and mental health. In 1999 the Royal College of Psychiatrists created a special interest group that looks at issues of spirituality and mental health (http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/college/specialinterestgroups/spirituality.aspx) and it has produced numerous articles in this area from a variety of spiritual and religious perspectives. There is a growing awareness of how important spirituality can be in the development of good mental health and also how spirituality can help people recover from mental health problems. This shift to a more positive view of spirituality in mental health is surprising because for many decades after Sigmund Freud, religion was considered pathological in the mental health establishment. However, the negative views of Freud and the mental health establishment regarding the pathological nature of religion are being disproven by modern empirically based studies which show there can be positives links between religion and mental health.¹ Further evidence of a shift in an attitude towards religion is given by Albert Ellis, one of the influential creators of cognitive therapy, who has recently reversed his original view that religion and good mental health oppose each other. He has done this in response to recent clear research which shows how spirituality can be helpful for mental health.²

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Deborah Cornah gives a good overview of the research around mental health and spirituality in the ‘Impact of Spirituality on Mental Health’ report produced by the Mental Health Foundation (See http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/impact-spirituality/). Two important findings in the report show that:

1) The sense of meaning and hope that religion or spirituality brings can help overcome the meaninglessness and loss of purpose that accompanies depression or even help protect against falling into depression.

2) Religion or spiritual practices can be helpful in coping with stress or anxiety. Spiritual practices such as meditation can help reduce stress and religious beliefs can help with anxiety around life threatening illnesses.

Research also finds that religious and spiritual beliefs are not always beneficial to mental health. Some religion and spirituality is harmful. For example, beliefs around cancer being a punishment from God can lead to higher anxiety and stress.³ The implication of the research is that the relationships between religion, spirituality and mental health are complex but it is clear that religion and spirituality can be a beneficial resource for our clients. This means that an ability as counsellors to work with religion and spirituality (both Christian and non-Christian) becomes important.

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² Albert Ellis, ‘Can Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) Be Effectively Used With People Who Have Devout Beliefs in God and Religion?’, Professional Psychology: Research and Practice 31:1 (2000), 29-33
The triangle of spirituality in counselling

Having laid foundations for understanding why it is important to consider clients spiritual experiences, it is now important to consider how this can be worked out in the counselling room with our clients. Hopefully it will be seen that the principles outlined below are equally applicable for working with the variety of perspectives within the Christian faith and for working with non-Christian spiritualities.

The different aspects of working with spirituality and religion in counselling can be summed up using the image of a triangle. The three corners of triangle represent the three different aspects we need to consider when working with client spirituality and at the centre of the triangle is a focus on counselling ethics which will inform this whole process:

![Triangle Diagram]

Ethical considerations

At the centre of the triangle of spirituality in counselling and at the centre of working religions and spirituality in counselling is a focus on ethics. Professional ethics and adherence to a professional ethical framework is important when working with client spirituality. The ACC framework for Ethics and Practice upholds the importance of client autonomy (5.2, page 2) and the need for explicit consent being sought regarding the counselling that is offered (5.1.16, page 4). The implication is that a counsellor should not impose their own spiritual views on their clients. This is also mirrored in other ethical frameworks such as the BACP. Clients have the right to decide on the role that spirituality or religion will play in their counselling with the content and reasoning for any spiritual interventions the counsellor introduces being fully discussed and agreed (informed consent). As counsellors we need to distinguish between seeking to do something to clients (imposing or manipulating a change based on our religious perspectives and goals) and doing something with (facilitating a change towards mutually agreed goals with a client’s informed consent regarding any interventions used). In the background of all that is said about the three corners of the triangle of spirituality in counselling is this implicit ethical perspective.

One important ethical consideration when working with non-Christian religions is the issue of evangelism. Evangelism is not appropriate in the counselling room under the guise of therapeutic practice when working with what can be vulnerable people. From a professional counselling
perspective we contract with our clients at the start of counselling to build a certain kind of therapeutic relationship with them and this contract does not (generally) include evangelism. Therefore with integrity to that contract it is important not to let our counselling to degenerate into evangelism. This would need a different kind of relational contract to be negotiated with the informed consent of the client and respect for their autonomy.

**Assessment**

The first corner of the triangle focusses on assessment. Clients can feel awkward about discussing spiritual issues with their counsellor whom they feel may judge them or they can feel pressured by a religious counsellor to speak about religious issues. As counsellors we need to be open to discussing the impact of a client’s religion or spirituality on their issues if this is what the client wants. It can be helpful to work with a client either during the first session or when they first bring up spiritual issues is to assess with them the relevance of their spirituality to the counselling process. A useful mnemonic to guide this discussion is FICA:

**Faith and belief** – Exploring with clients what their spiritual beliefs are. How do these currently bring or have in the past brought meaning to their lives? What spiritual practices do they find helpful?

**Importance** – How important is their spirituality to them and their current situation. A difference can be made between extrinsic religion and intrinsic religion. Intrinsic religious orientation involves the whole of a person’s life and is motivated internally. Religion is embraced and internalised completely such that it gives meaning and defines a person’s way of looking at themselves and the world. Extrinsic religious orientation involves a person using religion for their own ends such as status or social relationships and religion is only superficially embraced as a way of meeting needs. The motivation for religion is then found outside of the person.

**Community** – The importance of any religious / spiritual community and any support they receive.

**Address in counselling** – Would they like to talk about their personal spirituality in counselling? If so, how much would they like it to be part of sessions?

There are a variety of models which help assessing the importance of a client’s spirituality for counselling. The issue is less about which model is used and more about making an appropriate assessment which then informs our practice as counsellors.

**Assumptions**

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Assumptions form the focus of the second corner of the triangle of spirituality in counselling. The assumptions we make as a counsellor can be a big issue when working with clients of other faiths or spiritualities. Assumptions can come in various forms:

1. We can make assumptions based on our personal Christian faith about the value of a client’s spiritual practice and this can hinder our ability to identify and work with the more positive aspects of their beliefs.

2. We can make assumptions that we know what a client is talking about or we understand a person’s religious belief or spirituality without taking time to explore it. Even if we have a complete and accurate factual knowledge (which is probably unlikely given the plurality of religions and spiritualities which exist in our society) we still do not know what it means for our client personally.

3. We can assume we need to be experts in the client’s spiritual perspectives before we can work with it counselling. Jenkins says that his research shows that “…what clients need from us is not for us to be highly specialized spiritual experts. They need us to be good counsellors. To listen carefully, not to judge, to work with and build on their understandings, not impose our own.”

4. We make an assumption that just because a client does not mention religion or spirituality explicitly they are not talking about it.

In trying to avoid making assumptions a phenomenological perspective can be helpful which aims at giving as fuller description of a client’s experience as is possible. The phenomenological perspective involves three steps:

1) ‘Bracketing’ of assumptions – This involves setting aside our own beliefs, prejudices, biases and expectations as Christians. Although this is not fully possible, we consciously try to lessen the impact of our personal assumptions in a bid to understand the client’s spiritual experience.

2) Inviting description – This involves working with the client to describe their religious or spiritual experiences. Here basic counselling skills come into play: summarising what you hear the client saying, seeking clarification, use of open questions. Empathy involves trying to understand the client’s world as seen through the lens of their own religious or spiritual beliefs. Congruence can lead us to be honest with the client about our lack of understanding of their particular religious or spiritual perspective and inviting them to tell us more. Inviting description involves exploring the facts around the client’s spirituality and also the meaning for the client.

3) Equalization – Avoiding assuming that some aspects of the client’s spiritual practice or experience are more valuable or significant than other aspects. We treat everything with equal value, at least initially.

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It is only when we have truly heard and understood a client’s spiritual and religious experience from their point of view can we begin to work with it in counselling.

Examples of inviting description to understand client spiritual / religious experience:

“I am sorry I don’t know much about Hinduism. Can you tell me what it means for you?”
“What does prayer mean for you?”
“Tell me more about what happens as a Muslim when someone dies?”
“What do you do when you meditate?”
“Tell me a bit about your journey to faith?”
“How have your beliefs changed over the years?”
“What is God like for you?”

Interventions

The final corner of the triangle focusses on specific counselling interventions. How we work with a client’s spirituality will depend on their particular beliefs and practices. Earlier we identified how recent research has found that spirituality and religious practice can be beneficial to mental health. Researchers have also attempted to give reasons for this beneficial effect. Various different reasons are given and we will look at three which can help us identify possible interventions to use with clients:

- Religion and spirituality as a coping mechanism – Religious or spiritual activities are seen as resources which can help people cope with psychological pain, ongoing mental illness and stress. We can explore with clients the resources that are available in their religion or spirituality. Asking questions like the following: How has your spirituality helped you cope in the past when you were depressed? What aspects of your beliefs may be relevant for you here? How could your religious / spiritual beliefs help you cope now? Is prayer, meditation etc. something which helps when you are feeling anxious? We can then help the client explore how they can use these resources to further aid their coping in the situations they face.
- Religion, spirituality and sense of control – If we have an internal locus of control we feel that we can do something about the situations we face. If we have an external locus of control then we feel external circumstances are imposed on us and there is nothing we can do. We can help clients to explore their sense of control in their situations and how their religious or spiritual beliefs can inform this. Religious beliefs can be useful in cognitively reframing a situation which seems hopeless. For example, the Christian belief in the sovereignty of God or eternal life can bring hope that what now seems unending will not always be so. How might our client’s own personal religious beliefs help with reframing in this regard?
- Support from a faith community can help with mental health –

See for example Deborah Cornah, The Impact of Spirituality on Mental Health, (London: Mental Health Foundation, 2006) which was mentioned above.
This can help to reduce a sense of isolation, engender a sense of belonging and provide spiritual support from faith leaders. As counsellors we can help them think through what kind of support they need from their faith community and help them identify how they can engage that support.

We can use the above to help begin to create beneficial spiritual interventions to use with clients. Post and Wade identify two types of interventions which research shows can useful therapeutically:10

1. Modifying counselling techniques to integrate spiritual or religious content. For example a client finds their beliefs help them reframe a difficult issue and we can work with our clients at incorporating their beliefs in CBT exercises.

2. The use of specific religious or spiritual practices as a therapeutic tool e.g. If a client identifies mediation has helped them in the past, we could work with them to put together a schedule of meditation.

Research appears to show that the usefulness of an intervention is linked to that intervention being congruent with the client’s beliefs and it is not linked to a match between client and counsellor beliefs.11 This implies that counsellors can work beneficially with clients even if we don’t share their beliefs. It also suggests that the imposition of a counsellor’s religious practices on a client as a therapeutic tool is likely not to be beneficial if the client does not understand or subscribe to the counsellor’s beliefs or practices. For example, praying for a client for deliverance from evil could cause confusion, anxiety or feelings of being unfairly judged if the Christian concepts of evil or deliverance are not part of the client’s belief system. Any specific religious / spiritual practices need to be used with discernment with clients.

Conclusion

Whilst there is a lot more that can be said regarding working with spirituality and religion in counselling this article intends to provide a foundation on which this work can be built. Being mindful of the triangle of spirituality in counselling (assessment, assumptions and interventions in the context of ethical practice) will help us work more effectively with our clients.

About the Author

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10 Brian Post and Nathaniel Wade, ‘Religion and Spirituality in Psychotherapy: A Practice Friendly Review of Research’, *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session* 65:2 (2009), 131-146 (p.142)