

Editorial

Introduction of the Special Issue “Incorporating the Sacred in Counselling”

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It is understandable if readers of this Special Issue of *Religions* ask the following: “Why this topic?” “Why now?” “Why use the word ‘sacred’ within the title instead of ‘spirituality’ or ‘religion’?” These and other questions are natural and merit consideration.

In answer to the question “Why this topic?”, preliminary work on this issue commenced in April 2020. At the time, few people imagined neither the persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic nor its enduring psychological, social, economic, political, and psychospiritual effects on individuals, kinship networks, communities, and even nations. In April 2020, these effects were, at best, distant clouds on a horizon, defined by a belief that “we will find a way to overcome this challenge”. It was within this context of hope and uncertainty that work commenced on this Special Issue with the desire that it might highlight current thinking and practices related to spiritually integrated counselling and psychotherapy. However, the unanticipated short-term and long-term effects of the pandemic impacted the timelines that were originally set, requiring the re-issue of the Call for Papers. Despite these challenges, the articles within this Special Issue represent current and emergent aspects of the theory and practice of engaging spirituality within the work of counselling and psychotherapy, e.g., adapting counselling practices to fit the religious or spiritual orientation of the client, after death communication, children’s spirituality, developing trainees’ self-awareness of their own spirituality, an introduction to Islamic spirituality, and R/S support for minority and underrepresented college students.

The question “Why now?” invites the reader to consider how personal, societal, and global stressors touch the domains of emotional and relational well-being. The multifaceted nature of these challenges can impact a person’s basic physical survival, their psychological well-being, and their sense of social connection and location. This culminates in questions of meaning, which frequently have spiritual or metaphysical overtones. Of relevance to this issue of *Religions*, particularly the articles by Ingersoll et al. and Baig and Isgandarova, is the fact that religion and spirituality (R/S) have been identified as a social determinant of health (Faull and Hills 2006; Gross 2015; Hosseini Shokouh et al. 2017; Levin 2002). In this respect, it is acknowledged that R/S may have either a positive or negative contribution to individual and community responses to life’s stressors (Counted 2018; Cowden et al. 2022; Levin 2022).

Lastly, with respect to the question “Why use the word ‘sacred’ within the title instead of ‘spirituality’ or ‘religion’?”, two points are worth considering: (1) each of these words reflect distinct nuances of human experience and (2) despite these differences in meaning, the concepts of sacredness, spirituality, and religion suggest exhibit some overlap. Of these three, popular usage as well as the literature suggests that spirituality may be the most difficult to define. The words *spiritual* and *spirituality* tend to be used in ways that focus on the personal or individual nature of spirituality (cf. domain 3.1, *Semantic Domains Dictionary* n.d.; Hill et al. 2001; Provis 2023; Senreich 2013; Victor and Treschuk 2020). Both historically and in much of modern parlance, neither the word *spiritual* nor *spirituality* are considered



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to merely describe a state of being. That is, to say “I am a spiritual person” communicates more than the essence of a person’s sense of self. Indeed, irrespective of whether a person’s claim to be spiritual negates a formal affiliation with religion or affirms that they engage in practices they believe to be spiritual, there is an action tendency to “being spiritual” just as there is an action tendency to “being emotional”. Thus, the counselling literature notes a connection between individual personal experiences of spirituality and social behavior (cf. Hill et al. 2001, p. 53), and the philosophical literature identifies that spiritual practices give expression to the inner life of a person or community (cf. Eliade 1959; James 1977).

Culturally, although the primary sense of spirituality focuses on the immaterial or non-physical part of the person, the primary focus of religion frequently begins with values and beliefs (i.e., the cognitive) and then focuses on religious and ethical behaviour. Thus, *religion* is associated with the beliefs and practices that are held and practiced by religious communities and individuals associated with them (cf. domain 4.9, *Semantic Domains Dictionary n.d.*; “religion”, *Cambridge Dictionary n.d.*). Despite this apparent distinction between spirituality and religion, some dictionary definitions of spirituality include religion—e.g., “the quality that involves deep feelings and beliefs of a religious nature, rather than the physical parts of life” (“spirituality”, *Cambridge Dictionary n.d.*). Likewise, clinical approaches to spiritual assessment have frequently been constructed in such a way that spirituality and religion sometimes appear to be used interchangeably (cf. Borneman et al. 2010; Hodge 2001; LaRocca-Pitts 2009). Thus, Senreich (2013) argues for a definition of spirituality that is not tied to religion and that can be used with everyone, i.e., those who do not have a relationship with the Ultimate as well as those who are religious.

At this point, the reader may be wondering whether the word sacred in the title of this essay clarifies or further confuses the situation. This is an understandable question, especially given the extent that the word *sacred* and its cognates, i.e., sacredness, sacral, and sacrality, are associated with deities, places, objects, and rituals used in the practice of religion (cf. the range of domains the Semantic Domains Dictionary associates with the word sacred, <https://semdom.org/full-search?keys=sacred> (accessed on 2 November 2024)).

To begin, the use of the word sacred in the titles of this issue and this essay is intended to highlight the fact that the practice of engaging an individual’s spirituality, sense of the sacred, and religiosity is consistent with current best practices in multicultural counselling (Ratts et al. 2016).

Next, the use of the word sacred invites the reader to look beyond a particular deity, domain (e.g., religion), quality of being (e.g., religiousness or spirituality), and/or set of R/S practices with the purpose of considering two additional aspects of these phenomena, i.e., the significance an individual or group attributes to a set of R/S practices, a way of being, or the R/S domain and the affective perceptions of phenomena and practices considered to be sacred or spiritual (e.g., awe, fear, mystery).

Eliade’s philosophical reflections on the sacred provide a useful framework for differentiating between these two classes of sacredness, i.e., behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs that are intrinsically religious and those that are not. Eliade employs the term *hierophany*, which he defines as both a manifestation of mystery (Eliade 1959) and a manifestation of the Sacred (Eliade 1986). Thus, on the one hand, the word *hierophany* encapsulates a general class of events and experiences ranging from those that are intensely personal to those relevant to a specific community (Eliade 1959). On the other hand, “a *hierophany* is simultaneously an *ontophany*, the manifestation of the Sacred is equivalent to an unveiling of Being and vice versa” (Eliade 1986, p. 3). On a communal level, this form of sacredness includes the symbolic meanings attributed to events of national and cultural significance as well as any monuments or public events that commemorate these historic events. Individual experiences of *hierophany* may include, but are not limited to, the soothing or transformative

effect of a significant encounter with esthetic beauty, an experience of after death communication (cf. Pait et al. 2023), or the result of engaging in a specific practice, e.g., an act of creativity or meditation.

1. Psychology and the Sacred: An Evolving Relationship

Many texts related to the theory and practice of psychotherapy written before 1990 did not consider religion, mysticism, spirituality, or the meanings of these practices to be topics for study. Outside the field of psychotherapy, the legacy of this dominant narrative is discerned in its mirror image, i.e., counselling models that privilege religion and omit, marginalize, or problematize psychology (cf. Kellemen 2014; Lambert 2016). Within the field of psychotherapy, the enduring influence of this dominant narrative may be observed in the privilege accorded in some sectors to psychotherapeutic modalities that continue to ignore or marginalize R/S factors and, in many cases, ignore the significance of these in the lives of clients.

Each of these responses—the marginalization of psychology and of religion and spirituality—create thin narratives that maintain the power of the dominant narrative by excluding key aspects of the counsellee’s story (cf. Foucault [1970] 1981; Geertz 1973). Thus, one answer to the question “Why now?” is the continuing need for an approach that engages and integrates psychology and client spirituality within psychotherapeutic practice.

A second relationship between psychology and R/S, the psychology of religion, creates an alternative discourse by making R/S a valid focus for research. The knowledge accrued from this research has provided many insights, not the least of which has been a growing body of research highlighting the positive and negative roles of R/S in coping and resilience (cf. DeRossett et al. 2021; Dolcos et al. 2021; Pargament 1997; Sabanciogullari and Yilmaz 2021).

The final decades of the twentieth century brought about another shift in the relationship between psychology and R/S with the inclusion of the role of spirituality within therapeutic practice in recent textbooks (e.g., Jones 2019; Pargament and Exline 2021; Pearson and Marlo 2021; Richards et al. 2023; Sandage and Strawn 2022) and articles (e.g., Captari et al. 2022; Currier et al. 2023; Hosseini et al. 2022; Kim and Chen 2022; Mendenhall et al. 2022; Rasouli et al. 2023).

2. The Contexts of Client Spirituality

In the spirit of this turn in clinical practice, the remainder of this essay focuses on three clusters of spiritual narratives and connects these narratives to the articles in this Special Issue of *Religions*. The possibility that two or more of these narratives co-exist within the life of an individual informs the articles within this Special Issue and underscores the necessity of listening to the breadth of people’s stories and the meanings they attribute to their experience.

The first cluster of spiritual narratives are those constructed as an individual or family interacts with others within the general culture and any sub-communities with whom they identify (e.g., their ethnocultural community). In some cases, these spiritual narratives may be associated with emotional and spiritual pain, e.g., the experiences of indigenous or aboriginal communities within residential schools. In other cases, these spiritual narratives may be nurturing.

Ingersoll et al. acknowledge the intersectional nature of identity and the importance of attending to this in clinical practice (cf. Anders et al. 2021; Kanwal 2021; Ratts et al. 2016). Ingersoll et al. highlight the challenges these students experience when their cultural and R/S identities are overlooked or inadequately addressed within both their

educational experience and the counselling services that are available to them. Ingersoll et al.'s discussion of R/S as a vector in the identities of underrepresented first-generation, low-income (UFGLI) university students is a reminder that a person's R/S identity cannot be separated from their ethnocultural and sociocultural identities.

While Ingersoll et al. reflect on the intersection of spirituality in the lives of clients, the article by Evans and Nelson reminds the reader that spirituality in whatever form is as much a vector in the identity of the professional as it is in the lives of those they seek to help (cf. ASERVIC; Jones 2019). Thus, Evans and Nelson highlight the need for counsellors and clinical instructors to be intentionally self-aware of their own worldviews, the intersectionality of their own varied identities, and their biases concerning spirituality.

A third sub-narrative of spirituality within this first cluster occurs in situations where members of a marginalized ethnocultural community experience hope, strength, comfort, etc., through their interaction with a church or other religious body (cf. Ingersoll et al. 2021). Thus, Ingersoll et al., as well as Boynton and Mellan (2021), Coyle (2024), De Luna and Wang (2021), and Evans and Nelson (2021), make the case for the use of therapeutic responses that respect the client's identity, life experience, spiritual values, and the role of spirituality in their life.

Next, some spiritual narratives are shaped by a person's experiences within their kinship network, i.e., mesosystem (Hodge and Williams 2002). At least three outcomes are possible—pain and a rejection of religion, a sense of being nurtured by the spiritual narrative of the kinship group, or an embracing of what Fowler (1981) called paradoxical-consolidative faith through the modelling of positive spiritual coping amidst adversity (cf. Walsh 1999).

In their article, De Luna and Wang explore the potential role of incorporating spirituality in the treatment of children who have experienced trauma. A key aspect of this discussion acknowledges the effects of trauma in children's behavior—e.g., fear, disruptive or aggressive behaviour and emotional dysregulation. De Luna and Wang both acknowledge the positive role that a parent or caregiver may play in helping a child learn to manage the effects of childhood trauma. Thus, De Luna and Wang provide opportunities for the child and family to use positive spiritual coping strategies.

The third cluster of spiritual narratives reflects the presence and role of spirituality in the life of the individual. The articles in this Special Issue highlight two key nuances of this point. The first nuance relates to the *presence* of the spiritual in clients' lives. This is a foundational assumption in Dow's article, i.e., the spiritual *is real* and there is great diversity in its expression and experience. Thus, Dow (2023) states that the process of engaging spirituality in therapy begins when clinicians embrace the therapeutic possibilities of spirituality.

The second nuance to consider is the *role* of the spiritual and spirituality in the life of the individual (cf. Baig and Isgandarova 2023; Boynton and Mellan 2021; Dow 2023; Coyle 2024; Evans and Nelson 2021; Ingersoll et al. 2021; Pait et al. 2023).

Boynton and Mellan (2021) observe that parents were five times more likely than their child to describe their child as "not religious or spiritual," thus illustrating the importance of hearing the individual's story rather than relying on familial impressions, or family/cultural values and beliefs. Boynton and Mellan note that it is essential to work with the spiritual dimension when treating children's experiences of trauma, grief, and loss and facilitating post-traumatic growth. Grounded in Boynton's research, the authors propose a framework for co-creating a space for the sacred when counselling children. Likewise, Coyle's (2024) article argues for a methodology "that is both collaborative and conversational". This proposal reshapes the therapeutic conversation as a collaborative process rather than one

that merely identifies the function of R/S in the client's life, or a process of adapting the therapeutic process to the client.

Lastly, most of the articles in this Special Issue offer additional insights relating to the role of R/S in the life of the client and the therapeutic process. Thus, French's article, while directed toward the spiritual formation of students in Christian counselling programs, is a valuable reminder to clinicians of the need to be aware of their own spiritual location when working with R/S in a therapeutic context (cf. Hodge 2018). Next, the articles in this issue are important reminders that even though R/S themes, and specifically spirituality, are likely to be expressed in narratives that are unfamiliar to the clinician, there are appropriate processes for engaging these in psychotherapy, i.e., after death communication (Pait et al. 2023), children's spirituality (Boynton and Mellan 2021; De Luna and Wang 2021), cultural variations (Baig and Isgandarova 2023; Ingersoll et al. 2021), and individuals with intellectual disabilities (Dow 2023).

3. Conclusions

The relationship between the theory and practice of psychology and psychotherapy and R/S continues to evolve from a stance of non-engagement with R/S to engaging with clients' spirituality and religion. To this end, current thinking recognizes that clinicians have an ethical responsibility to be aware of their own values and assumptions about spirituality and religion (cf. Evans and Nelson 2021; French 2023; Pait et al. 2023). Next, current thinking acknowledges that both the client's and clinician's understanding of the role of spirituality within their life and its potential role within counselling and psychotherapy is co-constructed within the context of familial and social relationships as well as lived experience (cf. Baig and Isgandarova 2023; Boynton and Mellan 2021; De Luna and Wang 2021; Ingersoll et al. 2021). Lastly, current thinking recognizes that spirituality, mysticism, and religion cannot be confined to either a person's cognitions (e.g., beliefs, values, etc.) or their behaviours (e.g., the presence or absence of spiritual or religious behaviour). Thus, religion and spirituality are understood to be both an important component within an individual's identity (cf. Baig and Isgandarova 2023; Evans and Nelson 2021; Ingersoll et al. 2021) as well as something that has the capacity to contribute to a person's sense of well-being (cf., Baig and Isgandarova 2023; Boynton and Mellan 2021; Coyle 2024; De Luna and Wang 2021; Dow 2023; Ingersoll et al. 2021; Pait et al. 2023).

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