

***Religious/Spiritual Issues
in the Counseling Room:
What Pastors Knew All Along***

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W. D. Meylink and R. L. Gorsuch conducted some research in 1986 looking at pastors' referral patterns to counseling centers. They reported that 40% of people struggling with some issue in life seek help first from their clergy. Of that portion only 10% are actually referred to a counselor. The reasons for the low referral rate are varied, but one salient reason is likely an absence of religious/spiritual issues as a focus in many counseling rooms.

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We (M.R. McMinn, D.C. Aikins and Myself) reported in *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* (2003) 8 salient variables that marked positive referral relationship between clergy and Christian psychologists. The top 4 in order were:

- 1) The psychologist provided complementary services.
- 2) The psychologists had an awareness of religion/spirituality.
- 3) The psychologist was trusted by the clergy
- 4) The psychologists showed respect for the clergy.

It seems obvious to me that pastors want to know that counselors are on the same page in reference to caring for referred parishioners. Pastors have known all

along that hope for growth and change comes from someone greater than can be seen in any office.

Clergy are not the only people desiring to hear that religious/spiritual issues are included in the counseling room. A. Dueck, a professor of psychology presented a paper at the national convention for the Christian Association of Psychological studies (April, 2002, *Moral Discourse in Psychotherapy: A Peaceable Alternative*) in which he stated:

“While ethnic particularity continues to occupy a prominent place in the American psychological literature, the religious question has been largely divorced from its ethnic referent, and until recently was relegated to the furthest margins of psychotherapeutic practice. ***The silencing of an integrated ethnoreligious voice [those people who express a particular religious belief system that guides their lives] has contributed to a feeling of disempowerment for clinicians and clients alike.*** In North America, therapists continue to avoid religious issues for fear of being criticized for “value imposition.” In a therapy void of ethnoreligious sensitivity, ***the clinician's silence regarding cherished issues of religious faith and ethnic identity may be experienced as invalidation by the client.*** This too is not peaceable (p. 3).”

“The literature also suggests that ethnoreligious clients tend either to avoid psychotherapy, refrain from raising religious issues. Or translate their personal problems into thin psychological language in order to communicate with the clinician... ***Religious individuals tend naturally to construe their concerns in religious language.*** However, when in the strange, seemingly “public” environment of psychotherapy, ***they may adapt by using neutral language for personal problems, often parroting psychological terminology*** such as ‘self-worth,’ ‘personal concerns,’ ‘depression’ (p.13).”

Many Christian counselors as well as Christian counselees have been longing for the freedom to include religious/spiritual issues in the counseling room. Without the language of a person's religious belief system much of the meaning that the counselee adds to life events is lost. In these situations the dynamics of therapy suffer by missing the significance of a person's religious/spiritual life.

There is good news! Until recent years, much of the focus in the field of psychology was to explain a person's religious beliefs as simply an elaborate defense mechanism to avoid facing life. ***Thankfully, this is no longer the case for mainstream psychology [as in the American Psychological Association, (APA)].*** The staff at Cornerstone Counseling Center recently engaged in a discussion of this very issue. As a focus in that discussion we introduced two very relevant and exciting books by authors closely affiliated with the APA:

Richards, P. S. & Bergin, A. E. (2002). *A Religious/spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy*. Washington, DC: APA.

Pargament, K. I. (1997). *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory Research and Practice*. New York: Guilford Press.

Now it has become a clinical imperative to view a counselee's particular religious/spirituality as a salient variable in the meaning of clinical issues to a counselee's life. This holds great excitement for agencies like ours whose very mission is to bring growth between our counselee's and others just as we hope for growth between our counselees and God.

I have begun to use a religious/spirituality intake form sponsored by Richards and Begin (2002) with all my new counselees. The questions asked are:

1. Are religious or spiritual issues important in your life?
2. Do you wish to discuss them in counseling when relevant?
3. Do you believe in God or a Supreme Being?
4. Do you believe you can experience spiritual guidance?
5. What is your current religious affiliation?
6. Are you committed to your religious affiliation and actively involved?
7. What was your childhood religious affiliation (if any)?
8. Would you like your counselor to consult with your religious leader if it appears this could be helpful to you?
9. How important were religion or spiritual beliefs to you as a child and adolescent?
10. Are you aware of any religious or spiritual resources in your life that could be used to help you overcome your struggles?
11. Do you believe that religious or spiritual influences have hurt you or contributed to some of your struggles?
12. Would you like to consider religious or spiritual suggestions from your counselor if it appears that they could be helpful to you?

I'd like to make it possible to include the counselee's religious/spiritual language and perspective in what we talk about in therapy, ***if that is how they work through life's issues.*** Some people speak freely in their religious/spiritual language; others choose not to speak about religious issues in counseling. The most important part is that therapy is about how the counselee makes meaning of their situation. I'm just trying to catch-up to ***what pastors have known all along***; counselees who are Christians have a resource much greater than me, their Savior. I welcome Him into the counseling room. I'll keep you posted.