

A vertical flame, likely from a candle, is centered in the upper half of the page. It is a bright yellow-orange color, tapering towards the top and bottom. The background is solid black.

What Works in “SPIRITUAL COUNSELLING”?

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FAITH, RELIGION OR SPIRITUALITY?

"God is a Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Humans are spiritual and connection with God is spiritual. However, the often-interchangeable terms - faith, religion and spirituality – can confuse us to the point where the power of spirituality is diminished. As Christian counsellors, we can thank Newman (2004:106-109) for a simple but useful distinction between each of these (and to which I have added some explanations):

- "Faith" - Knowing (from beliefs, personal observations/ experiences and theology) the things that are "true all of the time in life", that assist humans in negotiating obscure regions of the psyche and that is helpful in times of trouble (Armstrong, 2009:xi). Faith is foundational for spirituality and religion.
- "Religion" - Doing (by engaging, in reading, and communicating about faith). This includes group participation in liturgy and meditation, rituals of gratitude and praise, and social interaction (Eliade, 1958:453-455). Religion heightens the "actions of faith" (Campbell, 1949; Campbell & Moyes, 1988:109) and should provide a pathway to spirituality.
- "Spirituality" - Being (the way in which our "numinous feeling" (Otto, 1923) affects our spirit, our persona and our actions). A deepened spirituality should be derived from and congruent with faith and religion.

This individual quest of spirituality is the most mysterious and as a result, the least understood. For example, in the Pilgrim Model, religious and faith information were psychoanalytically investigated in the three ego states – Parent, Adult and Child (Milnes, 2017:203-217) but there was also a need for a greater study of "spirituality". I wish to address that lack in this essay.

Spirituality

The flame of our spiritual life coexists with the ordinary. In *Catching Fire, Becoming Flame: A Guide for Spiritual Transformation*, Father Albert Haase (2013: chapter 2) directly linked the metaphor of fire with spiritual encounter:

That's part of the contagion of godly enthusiasm and the paradox of catching fire and becoming flame: the extraordinary occurs right in the midst of the ordinary; the marvellous is found amid the mundane".

Spirituality has been explored over the millennia but I shall cite only the contributions of three twentieth century theologians – Paul Tillich (1952), Sophia Fahs (1923) and Rudolf Otto (1923):

i. Spirituality as Meaning:

Paul Tillich (1952:162-177) described spirituality as the "courage to be" where our very existence is grounded in a personal faith that enables them to confront the anxiety of fate and death, the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, and the anxiety of meaninglessness and emptiness.

ii. Spirituality as Feeling:

Sylvia Fahs has written an evocative if somewhat dated description of the transmission of spirituality across generations:

For the child to catch the mother's tone of voice when she speaks to the heavenly Father, for him to see, his earthly father kneel in reverence and hear him speak to an unseen God, for the child to snuggle his head in his mother's lap - and he lisps his own little prayer and for him to feel the touch of the mother's hand on his head. These feeling tones are considered more important for the child than the meaning of words. (Fahs, 1923:910)

Rudolf Otto (1923:11-13) described the "feeling of the numinous" (spirituality) as the *mysterium tremendum* that is "not merely a subjective feeling in the mind ... (but) transcends or eludes comprehension in rational or ethical terms ... (it) is felt as an objective and outside of the self". The *mysterium tremendum* is experienced as:

- "Awefulness" (*tremendum*);
- "Overpoweringness" (*majestas*) vs limitations of creaturehood (*Geschöpflichkeit*);
- "Energy" (*urgencia*); and
- "Wholly Other" (transcendent *magisterium*) (Otto 1923:18-24).

The *mysterium tremendum* can be like "a gentle tide, pervading the mind with tranquil mood of deepest peace that may

	Comprehensible	Incomprehensible
Spirit	Reminiscence (anamnesis) of an obscure possession before insight.	Awakening to the Other. <i>Geschöpflichkeit</i> encounters <i>Majestas</i> . Consciousness of sudden, un-meditated and achieved in-spiration (<i>aperçu</i>).
Soul	Reasonable , moral, & intelligent spiritual encounters as a familiar experience.	Profound bottommost depth (<i>fundus animae</i>) of the soul.

pass into a lasting attitude of the soul – thrillingly vibrant and resonant. It may burst in sudden eruption from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions. It may become hushed trembling and speechless humility." (Otto, 1923:193-196).

iii. Spirituality as an Encounter of the Soul and the Spirit:

According to Rudolf Otto, the *mysterium tremendum* is encountered in different ways through the human soul and the human spirit as both "comprehensible" and "incomprehensible" which I have placed in chart form.

In spite of the fire of spirituality being discovered in God as the ground of being, felt as the numinous *mysterium tremendum* and encountered within the human spirit and the human soul, there are times when these Christians require counselling. Christian therapists should feel confident to meet these clients in their spiritual and emotional crises.

Providing Spiritual Counselling

Sperry & Shafranske's (2005) Spiritually Oriented Psychotherapy has identified three broadly defined clinical situations that may be addressed:

a) Spirituality as a resource in psychotherapy - identifies existent beliefs, values and practices to encourages

psychological adjustment – such as "coming out of Egypt" as a metaphor for psychological adjustments that need to be made.

b) Spiritual conservation and transformation - a psychotherapeutic process of questioning the client's strands of present belief to:

i. preserve, re-evaluate, reconstruct or re-create the foundations of the faith (conserving)

and/or

ii. transform the coherence of meaning (transformation).

For example, a client may need to reconfigure their conception of God from being a "harsh judge" to a "loving parent" – while still adhering to the foundations of faith.

c) *Spiritual quest* of psychotherapy that parallels the personal explorations of psychological conflict to reach new insights for life so that religious scaffolding is replaced by an encounter to find a spiritual purpose and meaning - a home and a respite from a chronic religious malaise.

These classifications are a useful starting point that steer us away from relying on a shared "faith-based" or "religion-oriented" conversation. Recent polling indicates that people are turning away from religious adherence towards a

more imprecise label - "spiritual but not religious" (Warden, 2017). It is important that Christian Counsellors grapple with "spiritually oriented psychotherapy".

We shall look at the practical application of these categories by reference to some case studies:

a) Spirituality as a Resource

Case Study

Bob (name and circumstances changed to protect privacy), was sent to therapy by his wife because she believed that he was stuck in grief about the death of their first born son. The infant, Jason, had died in Bob's arms during the night while both parents were passed out from the over-consumption of alcohol. No legal charges were laid against the parents and the death was ruled as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Fifteen years had passed and the couple had four other children. However, a central piece in the family living room was a "shrine" - a photo of Jason and an urn containing his ashes. Each and every day, Bob went down to the back shed to spend time grieving about the loss of Jason. Bob's wife found that he was incapable of loving her and that he neglected his other children. She wanted to leave with the children so that she could raise them in a more positive environment.

In taking his spiritual history, Bob told me that he had been raised in a Christian home but lapsed in his teens and he no longer believed in God. Bob made little progress in five therapy sessions. Reaching an impasse, I asked him about his faith and he replied that he believed in heaven because that was where Jason was. I requested and received permission to lead him in a guided religious imagery. After "entering heaven" I asked Bob to imagine that he could speak with Jason who would be now be 15 years of age. When Bob came out of his reverie, I asked him what he saw and heard. He replied that he met Jason on a perfect beach with endless waves and that Jason was very happy. Jason had lots of friends

and enjoyed catching perfect waves every day and told his father not to worry about him. A short while later Bob volunteered that Jason had also said to him, "If you really want me to be happy, look after mum and the kids". This led to a discussion about what would be needed at home to fulfil Jason's wishes. Among other things, Bob decided to take down Jason's shrine and empty the ashes into the sea on a Sunday morning. At the next session, Bob described a "ceremony" that went wrong - the wind blew the ashes onto the beach instead of going out to sea, and the waves washed the ashes around their feet. I decided to be a little religiously creative and suggested that Jason wanted to say good-bye by coming back to them and showing that he was still thinking about them by washing their feet. Bob adopted this theologically suspect piece of information enthusiastically and decided that the matter was done. A few months later Bob's wife reported that things had changed dramatically in their home. Bob had become a husband and father in the home and I also heard from independent third party reports that the family was doing a lot better.

Analysis: In this case, Bob's rather child-like and undeveloped religious formation provided a basis for rekindling a flickering spiritual flame. While a visualization without reference to Bob's religious faith could have been done, it was the connection to his "belief" had an impact and provided a firm basis for re- decision (McNeel, 2016, chapter 3). In Shafranske's (2006) terms the resource of Bob's religious "beliefs" helped to change his outlook on life and to regain his sense of being.

b) Conservation and Transformation

Case Study

Zita (name and circumstances changed to protect privacy) was raised in a religious home where her parents insisted on her frequent participation in regular ceremonies and classes, compliance with strict gender-based dress codes, and exclusive socialization

within her religious community. Zita now attends university where she encounters views that run counter to her faith. To complicate matters, Zita is heavily involved in her religious community. They have paid for some of her training and are now expecting her to use these skills in teaching and caring for others. Unfortunately, Zita made some statements concerning gender roles that have caused some concern to her religious leaders who now have decided to "discipline" her. Zita is still very attached to her faith but is wracked by guilt and shame. She is also suffering from the effects of social ostracism from her friends and family.

She has come to the university counselling clinic to seek help. In this case, the psychotherapist did not share Zita's faith but was able to focus on the strands of existing faith that we consolidated into the beliefs and practices that supported psychological adjustment and healthy self-regulation (Baumeister, 2005:57-72). The therapeutic process allowed Zita to not only "conserve" her faith but transform it so that it was more relevant to her university life. In so doing she was able to bring unity to the demands of her Parent ego state (spiritual care for herself instead of religious injunctions), her Adult ego state (to think through how faith could be integrated into her present situation) and her Child ego state (to feel sufficient courage and resilience to resist the negative power of her religious upbringing, the pull of social obligations but find positive comfort in her faith). The psychotherapeutic process assisted Zita to maintain emotional and social contact with her family, healthy relationship with the community even though she moved to a fellowship more in keeping with her present beliefs.

Analysis: Fortunately, Zita's present intrapsychic spiritual conflict was not seen by the psychotherapist as an opportunity for surreptitious "re-education" to psychotherapist to insist on an alternative view of gender roles. Instead, the spiritual therapy (Shafranske, 2006) allowed Zita to "preserve, re-evaluate, reconstruct or re-create the

foundations of her faith" (conserving) while developing a healthy coherence of meaning in her life (transformation).

c) Spiritual Quest

Case Study

Some people find it impossible to remain within a religious organization but still want to retain their search for spiritual meaning.

As a child and teenager, I never had any interest in religion – yet later on I discovered that I had in me the inclination to become a deeply spiritual man. That inclination was not being triggered by the religious dogmas and practices that I was exposed to, so I felt it simply wasn't for me. At the time I was not aware of the distinctions of spirituality vs religion. I grew up in a regular, mildly religious middle-class family. My parents identified themselves as Christians, but they didn't really go to church. My dad wanted me to go through catechism classes, but he never forced me to – I just attended one because he insisted, but felt no pull to continue. For me, religion was something boring and lifeless, some that old people did. On the other hand, once I discovered spirituality it fired me up in life. It gave me meaning, direction and purpose. It helped me grow as a person. It gave me tools to overcome the worst in myself, to develop myself, and to explore the transcendental aspects of our existence. The fire for spirituality – for deeper meaning, direction and truth is inherent in all people. For some of us, it is drowned by cynicism, scepticism, and scientific materialism; for others it is expressed in limiting ways through blind religious faith. Happy are those who recognize and own this drive, keeping it pure and letting it guide their lives in a constructive way.

*Religion asks you to believe.
Spirituality asks you to look.*

Religion has dogmas. Spirituality has wisdom teachings

Religion wants obedience.

Spirituality wants experimentation...

*Religion wants to comfort you.
Spirituality wants to liberate you.*

Religion is external. Spirituality is internal.

Religion is the form. Spirituality is the essence.

*Religion wants to covert you.
Spirituality wants to inspire you.*

Religion is an institution. Spirituality is a journey.

(Giovanni, acc.2018).

Analysis: Giovanni has obviously gone beyond religious institutions and seems to indicate that he has left the "religious and entered a higher "spiritual plane". Giovanni's emphasis on his Spiritual Quest (Shafranske, 2006) has resulted in the power of his past experiences with religious faith resources being diminished. I would argue that this rupture between religious faith and spirituality is artificial. The linkage between religious belief and spirituality was perhaps best described way back in 1923:

For religious people ... the fundamental doctrines are unchanging, principles and standards are sure ... the 'faith of our fathers' is universally applicable to old and young alike, sure religion provides comfort and stability through the years (becomes) woven into the very warp and woof of personality. God becomes a lifelong search, the essence of life's mysteries, and the central reality of a vast universe that remains mysterious in spite of man's continuing quest for understanding ... Religion never is a thing of mere intellectual assent. It has a way of tying itself up intimately to men's secret selves. Religion has to do with the purposes, feelings, wishes, ambitions – the innermost secrets of life. (Fahs, 1923:910).

Cutting the ties back to religion (and foundational spiritual formation) comes at a cost. Let us suppose that Giovanni has come to counselling during a period of extreme grief – such as losing a spouse, confronted with bankruptcy, or in marital distress – how would a Christian counsellor be of assistance? In his grief he may find that his new-found "spirituality" has lost its faith and religious moorings – the "faith of our fathers" no longer holds any weight and has lost its congruence. As a result, his early numinous feelings that were aroused during his religious faith upbringing would be lost unless it was reconnected with his spiritual journey. The spiritual psychotherapist (Shafranske, 2006) for Giovanni could explore the resources of his faith and explore those elements of both conservation and transformation to reconnect to his spiritual quest and psychological health.

d) When Faith, Religion and Spirituality Collide

John and Mary (name and circumstances changed to protect privacy) have come to counselling because of growing religious conflict within the home. John was brought up in a strict fundamentalist home and has been recently attracted to teachings that are at the extreme end of the religious spectrum. He regularly attends meetings, spends a long time researching the evils of other religions and has joined a Christian bikie group that specializes in evangelistic outreach to outback communities. John expressed his fears of other religions on social media in extremist terms - which was a source of great embarrassment to his wife, Mary. John's posts also contributed to tension with his grown children to the point where they do not want to see him any longer. Mary confessed that she was a "spiritual person in her soul but an agnostic in belief". She hated John's repeated messages to her that she is "outside the fold". They have had many heated arguments. Mary has had enough and even though she loves John, she wants to leave him rather than lose contact with her children.

John's view of faith was to return to the black-and-white religion of his childhood that was very negative about those outside. In contrast Mary has not developed any strong religious affiliations because in her family tradition was that this was a very private matter. While John professed to have a strong meditative regime his ability to tolerate ambiguity was limited. In contrast, Mary had not put much effort into her spiritual journey and was put off by John's approach. Spiritually Focussed Psychotherapy for John began by asking him whether his faith and religion was bringing his family any closer to faith in Christ. Fortunately John was a humble man who was able to examine the effects of the negative effects of his Critical "religious" Parent and change the way he viewed Mary's faith journey. Instead of seeing her as a "non-believer", John was able to forgo his strong religious beliefs and nurture Mary's spiritual journey. For her part, Mary realized in the psychotherapy that her "spirituality" lacked the foundations in faith and religion. The couple were eventually able to read the scripture together, share their opinions and deepen their relationship with one another. John was also able to restore his relationship with his children to the point where there was an exchange of ideas about spirituality.

Analysis: Spiritually focussed psychotherapy required work at all three levels – faith, religion and spirituality – as well as all elements of Shafranske's (2006) Spiritually-focussed Psychotherapy. Mary's "spirituality" was not anchored strongly in faith and religion while John's faith and religion had ruptured his relationship with his family. The psychotherapeutic process used the spiritual resources of faith while questioning the present strands of their beliefs so that each of them were able to preserve, re-evaluate, reconstruct or re-create the foundations of their faith (conserving) and transform the coherence of meaning (transformation) to continue on their spiritual quests for meaning and knowing.

A Concluding Note for Spiritually Focussed Psychotherapists

Spiritually-Focussed Psychotherapy works! The ground of our being is spiritual – in our knowing (faith), doing (religion) and being (spirituality). The *mysterium tremendum* is both comprehensible and incomprehensible and continues to affect the very warp and woof of our personalities. Sperry and Shafranske's (2005) *Spiritually Focussed* Therapy provides Christian Counsellors with a structure that enables us to integrate spirituality into what has sometimes been perceived as a largely secular pursuit. The healing power of spirituality became evident in the case studies that ranged from the limited and shallow faith journeys through to the profound and well-developed. Psychotherapists are required by law and by good sense to put aside personal faith beliefs and religious ideas when providing appropriate spiritual counselling. However, a respectful spiritual therapeutic focus can result in profound psychological adjustment and a discovery of renewed purpose and meaning.

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