

CONCEPTUALIZING SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION: WHERE WE'VE COME FROM, WHERE WE ARE, AND WHERE WE ARE GOING

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Abstract

Within the recent empirical and theoretical literature regarding spirituality and religion, an onomastic and conceptual polarization between the constructs of *spirituality* and *religion* exists. This article presents and examines the strong distinction currently being made between the constructs, reviews the voices that question the merits of the polarization, surveys the philosophical evolution of the distinction, and explores the resulting problematic issues that impede empirical research. This article concludes by suggesting that the work of Wilber (1999/2005) offers a nascent convergence of the two constructs and a pathway toward conceptual entelechy.

Key words: Spirituality, religion, counseling, religiosity

Introduction

While research examining spirituality and religiosity in relation to outcomes of physical and mental health is growing, a review of the recent literature reveals a conceptual polarization regarding the constructs of *spirituality* and *religion*. The relationship between *religion* and *spirituality* as understood by William James (1901/1985) has notably shifted with time as presented by the work of the Summit on Spirituality in 1995 (Miller, 1999). This article notes the shift from James to the Summit on Spirituality and reviews the current conceptualizations that are prominent in the recent literature. This article will then contend that the current conceptualizations are unbalanced and, given the evidence of conceptual and empirical ambiguities both within and outside the profession, unwarranted. The evolution of the current conceptualizations of *religion* and *spirituality* will be explored, as well as philosophic assumptions that inform them. Problematic research issues resulting from lack

of conceptual entelechy will be identified and a pathway toward conceptual convergence and coherence, grounded in the work of Wilber (1999/2005), will be offered.

Where We've Come From: The shift

William James (1901/1985), the progenitor of the discourse regarding religion and mental health, in his seminal work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, presents religion as the feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals in relation to the divine. Religion, according to James, draws significance from a spiritual world that is immaterial and the attainment of union and presence within the spiritual domain is religion's true end. James maintained that religion in its most authentic form is a deep individual experience from which the outcome is the "loss of all worry, the sense that all is well with one, the peace, harmony, the *willingness to be*" (1901/1985, p. 248). Religion in corporate form was referred to by James as "religious life," and relegated to a secondary status. As summarized by Taylor (2002), for James "the *real* locus or religion is in individual experience . . . that is, in feeling" (p. 7), and we should hesitate from "defining 'religion' in terms of 'church' and thereby dismissing it too quickly, and missing the value of the real thing" (p. 13). Thus, as one reads James, authentic religion is a dynamic, individual experience that encompasses the spiritual domain.

Ninety four years later at the Summit on Spirituality (1995), the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling, a branch of the American Counseling Association (ACA), produced what was intended to be a normative definition of spirituality (Miller, 1999). According to the Summit, spirituality is:

...the animating force in life, represented by such images as breath, wind, vigor, and courage. Spirituality is the infusion and drawing out of spirit in one's life. It is experienced as an active and passive process. Spirituality also is described as a capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons. This spiritual tendency moves the individual towards knowledge, love, meaning, hope, transcendence, connectedness, and compassion. Spirituality includes one's capacity for creativity, growth, and the development of a values system. *Spirituality encompasses the religious* [italics added], spiritual, and transpersonal (p. 30).

What is clear from this definition, and distinct from the work of James, is that religion is to be understood as a component, a trait if you will, within the broader context of spirituality.

Where We Are: Current Conceptualizations, Imbalance, Philosophical Assumptions and Empirical Hurdles

This shift in onomastic rendering, from James in 1901 to the Summit on Spirituality in 1995, and therefore the shift in the conceptualization of the constructs of spirituality and religion over the past century, warrants our attention as we seek to understand, research, and apply the human experience of spirituality and religion to counseling theory and education. In order to precisely clarify the characterization of spirituality and religion in the recent literature, numerous sources will be cited in the following section, illustrative of the conceptual polarization. A case will be made that the current conceptualizations are unbalanced and unwarranted, the identifying philosophical assumptions of modernity and postmodernity that inform the conceptual polemic will be presented, and resulting empirical problems will be identified and addressed.

Conceptualizations of Spirituality

Most of the recent literature is in step with the Summit on Spirituality. Fontana (2003) conceptualizes spirituality as the belief in supernatural reality, the distinction between sacred and mundane reality, striving to attain higher consciousness, the belief in the afterlife, and a moral code and inner harmony. For Heliminiak (2001), spirituality is more concisely the metaphysical assumption that there is a self-transcending dimension. Heaton, Schmidt-Wilk, and Travis (2004) distinguish between *pure spirituality* and applied spirituality. Pure spirituality is to be understood as a silent, unbounded, inner experience of pure self-awareness devoid of cognitions and affect. *Applied spirituality* refers to the domain of measurable applications and outcomes that arise from the inner experience of *pure spirituality*. Jankowski (2002) views spirituality as having three dimensions—the cognitive, the metaphysical and the relational. The cognitive

dimension relates to the holding of existential values and beliefs, the metaphysical dimension encompasses the experiential realm of spiritual phenomena beyond logical explanation, and the relational dimension addresses the sense of connectedness between people, nature, God and the universe. A more concise conceptualization is that of Pargament (1999), who describes spirituality as finding, conserving and transforming the sacred in one's life.

In keeping with the theorists cited above and the Summit on Spirituality, Table 1 illustrates the characterizations of spirituality throughout the recent literature.

TABLE 1
Conceptualization of Spirituality in the Recent Literature

<u>Descriptor</u>	<u>Source</u>
1. Meaning	Allen & Coy, 2004; Benson et al., 2003; Bloch, 2004; Bruce & Cockreham, 2004; Graham, Flowers, & Burke, 2001; Ingersoll & Bauer, 2004; MacDonald, 2004; Miller, 1999; Piedmont, 2001; Purdy & Dupey, 2005; Sperry & Mansager, 2004; Wolf & Stevens, 2001
2. Connectedness	Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003; Bloch, 2004; Burke, et al., 1999; Ingersoll & Bauer, 2004; Jankowski, 2002; Kingjerski, & Skrypnek, 2004; Piedmont, 2001; Purdy & Dupey, 2005; Wolf & Stevens, 2001
3. Tanscendental/ Transcendent	Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Benson et al., 2003; Jankowski, 2002; Kelly, 1995; Kingjerski, & Skrypnek, 2004; Piedmont, 2001; Polanski, 2002; Standard et al., 2000

4. Subjective	Allen & Coy, 2004; Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Jankowski, 2002; Kelly, 1995; Polanski, 2002; Standard et al., 2000
5. Purpose	Benson et al., 2003; Bloch, 2004; Ingersoll & Bauer, 2004; Miller, 1999; Sperry & Mansager, 2004
6. Universal Experience	Helminiak, 2001; Piedmont, 2001; Polanski, 2002; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Standard et al., 2000
7. Compassion	Ingersoll & Bauer, 2004; Purdy & Dupey, 2005;
8. Inner wholeness	Burke et al., 1999; Wolf & Stevens, 2001; Sperry & Mansager, 2004
9. Experiential	Allen & Coy, 2004; Burke et al., 1999
10. Integral	Miller, 1999; Standard, Sandhu, & Painter, 2000
11. Multidimensional	Benson et al., 2003; Jankowski, 2002
12. Ecumenical	Richards & Bergin, 1997
13. Existential	Jankowski, 2002
14. Hope	Ingersoll & Bauer, 2004
15. Individual	Helminiak, 2001
16. Internal experience	Heaton et al., 2004
17. Inner fulfillment	Sperry & Mansager, 2004
18. Life-enhancing	Miller, 1999

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|-----------------|-------------------------|
| 19. Limitless | Heaton et al., 2004 |
| 20. Natural | Miller, 1999 |
| 21. Private | Richards & Bergin, 1997 |
| 22. Spontaneous | Richards & Bergin, 1997 |

Conceptualizations of Religion

The literature's recent conceptualizations of religion, consistent with the Summit on Spirituality, do not resemble James' characterization of the construct. Religion is usually distinguished quite strongly from spirituality. Furthermore, the convivial, dynamic language of James is absent. Fontana (2003) traces the word "religion" from the Latin *religio*, which he states is usually translated as "obligation" or "bond" (p. 6). According to Fontana, religion is characterized as an obligation to a particular organization or tradition of faith. Polanski (2002) holds that religion is the teaching of one tradition or another regarding claims to salvation. Bruce and Cockreham (2004, p. 384) cite Legere's (1984) definition of religion as the attempt to "codify and capture spiritual experiences within a system." Standard, Sandu and Painter (2000) conceptualize religion as a set of beliefs or doctrines that are institutionalized. Corbett (1990) asserts that religion generally refers to an "integrated set of beliefs and activities" (as cited in Graham, Furr, Flowers, & Burke, 2001, p. 2). Rarely in the recent literature is religion characterized with transcendent language similar to that which characterizes spirituality. Pargament (1997), the exception, defines religion as the search for significance through the sacred.

Table 2 illustrates the characterizations of religion throughout the recent literature.

TABLE 2
Conceptualization of Religion in the Recent Literature

<u>Descriptor</u>	<u>Source</u>
1. Institutional	Kelly, 1995, Burke et al., 1999; Standard et al., 2000; Helminiak, 2001; Nelson, Rosenfeld, Breitbart, & Galietta, 2002; Polanski, 2002; Wolf & Stevens, 2001
2. Beliefs	Allen & Coy, 2004; Burke et al., 1999; Graham et al., 2001
3. Organization	Benson et al., 2003; MacDonald, 2004;
4. Denominational	Richards & Bergin, 1997; McDonald, 2004
5. System of belief/ meaning	Brega & Coleman, L. M. (1999). Benson et al., 2003;
6. Doctrine	Standard et al., 2000
7. External	Richards & Bergin, 1997
8. Explanation of the mystical	Allen & Coy, 2004
9. Ritualistic	Richards & Bergin, 1997
10. Public	Richards & Bergin, 1997
11. Social	Helminiak, 2001;
12. Tradition	Polanski, 2002

Unbalanced and Unwarranted Conceptualizations

Thus a definitive shift is evident in the conceptualizations of spirituality and religion over the past century. Religion in the recent literature is rarely referred to in the inviting manner of James, but rather is rendered in language of a stark and uninviting nature. This shift of characterization has not gone wholly unnoticed. As noted in Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999), “Relatively broad and balanced conceptualizations of religiousness and spirituality have given way to narrower and more biased perspectives” (p. 890). Moreover, Pargament (1999) summarizes the evolution of the construct of religion as moving from a “broadband construct—one that includes both the institutional and the individual, and the good and the bad—to the narrowband institutional construct that restricts and inhibits human potential” (p. 3).

And while it is clear that a strong conceptual distinction between the constructs is ubiquitous within the recent literature, such a clear distinction is not consistent with perspectives outside of the academic journals. Zinnbauer et al., (1997) conducted a content analysis of 305 individuals’ definitions of religion and spirituality and determined that great variety exists regarding the ways that people from various professional and religious backgrounds use and experience the constructs of religion and spirituality. Furthermore, Scott (as noted in Zinnbauer et al., 1999) performed a content analysis of 31 definitions of religiousness and 40 definitions of spirituality that have appeared in social scientific writings throughout the 20th century and found no single comprehensive category that could qualify as a normative definition for either of the constructs.

The counseling profession is therefore left in a quandary, needing to address two salient questions: What are the assumptions behind the evolution of the polarization that is evident within the recent literature? And, how are researchers, practitioners, and educators to understand and work with these constructs?

Bias Engendered by Modernity and Postmodernity

As evidenced by James (1901/1985), religion at the dawn of the 20th century emphasized a more dynamic sensibility, an experience one perceived, felt or participated in. It has evolved to a reified state, i.e., more objective and definable within a systematic tradition (Wulff, 1997). This evolution of the term *religion* from the more qualitative and subjective experience to the more axiomatic and doctrinal was a natural outcome of passage through the age of modernity. Modern thought sought to understand all reality, i.e., ontology, according to a meta-narrative devoted to the primacy of organizational methodology, objective reason, and systematic modalities. It was inevitable that the modern paradigm would process the construct of religion to correlate with modernistic assumptions. The “modernization” of religion, if you will, resulted in a construct that Wunthrow (1998) describes as a place of existential *dwelling*, stationary and fixed within a meta-narrative.

Once religion was laden with the mantle of systematic dogma at the hand of modernism, Rizzuto (2005) notes that it is no coincidence that the separation of spirituality from religion occurred with the arrival of the new paradigm of postmodernism—a world view that values heterogeneity, fragmentation and scrutiny of comprehensive systems. Maslow (1970) was an early post-modern leader in the movement to identify spirituality as a universal human phenomenon and called for the separation of spirituality from institutionalized religion.

Sperry and Shafranske (2005) identify a series of factors that has exaggerated the distance between religion and spirituality: (a) postmodernism’s embrace of truth questioning, personal autonomy and individual experience, (b) the ensuing erosion of institutional authority and, (c) exposure to competing belief systems and diverse worldviews resulting from mass media and immigration. Religion became *prima facie* representational of grand meta-narratives, and the call for the death of meta-narratives by postmodernism left an existential vacuum to be filled. The contemporary construct of spirituality was conceived to fill the gap.

Roof (1999) asserts that with postmodernism, a shift occurred “from a world in which beliefs held believers to one in which believers hold beliefs” (pp. 56-57). Wunthrow (1998) suggests

that “postmodernized” spirituality invites existential questing, the continuous process of deconstructing and drafting a meta-narrative, a phenomenological movement in the transcendent. Modernized religion as a construct is represented as encompassing its followers, a specific point to be located on an existential map being primary to its human devotees. Postmodernized spirituality, in contrast, is characterized as emanating from within believers, not a point on the existential map but an inner direction to be charted.

The profession must then address the problematic issues related to the gap between religion and spirituality that has arisen as a result of passage through the epistemological filters of modernity and postmodernity. Though underappreciated, a few scholars underscore some hurdles inherent in polarizing religion and spirituality. Zinnbauer, et al. (1999) concluded that the polarization at the hand of contemporary theorists—organized religion versus personal spirituality; substantive religion versus functional spirituality; and negative religiousness versus positive spirituality—results in a loss of focus necessary for research and leaves us with a static rendering of religion and an ephemeral, coreless version of spirituality. Hill and Pargament (2003) also suggest several problems resulting from the strong distinction. They concur with Wunthrow (1998) that the designation of spirituality as “individual” and religion as “institutional” denies the social components of spirituality and ignores the existence of private, personal experiences within all of the great religious traditions. Pargament (2002) asserts that the polarized perspective overlooks the potentially helpful and harmful elements of both religion and spirituality. Finally, Sperry and Shafranske (2005) caution that such strong distinctions between religion and spirituality may lead to needless duplication in concepts and measures, engendering significant hurdles in research.

Hurdles for Empirical Literature

The canon of empirical literature is generally supportive of Elkins’ (2005) contention that spirituality and religion are associated with an ontological power that promotes health and resilience in the lives of people (Child Trends, 2002; Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging Working Group, 2003; Flannelly, Ellison, &

Strock, 2004; Graham, et al., 2001; Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Seeman, Dubin, & Seeman, 2003; Wolf & Stevens, 2001; Young, Cashwell, & Shcherbakova, 2000). Echoing the caution by Sperry and Shafranske (2005) mentioned above, Ingersoll and Bauer (2004) warn that we are currently relying on research-based constructs that convey spiritual and religious well-being while admitting that, given the lack of conceptual continuity, we do not know the full extent of what spirituality or religion *even* is in the first place. Emerging in the literature at this time is the call to move through this state of conceptual discontinuity in order to foment a more productive period of research by operationally defining broader and more balanced conceptualizations of religion and spirituality.

Responding to Ingersoll and Baur's (2004) call for conceptual continuity will be as challenging for the profession as it is necessary. The recent literature concurs with Benson (2004) that "the field is far from reaching consensus on the definitions of religiousness and [spirituality]" (p. 48). Heaton et al. (2004) reiterate the very complex nature of researching a domain that is, by definition, subjective, abstract, limitless and all-pervading in its effects on the human condition. Bauman (1998) submits that defining such terms "amounts to replacing one ineffable with another—to be the substitution of the incomprehensible for the unknown" (p.55), while Macdonald (2004) asserts that ambiguity is endemic to a debate of such metaphysical constructs. Cashwell (2005) suggests that this seeming ineffability is a result of the developmental essence of the terms. He submits that spirituality and religion are highly personal constructs that change throughout one's development so that each person defines them differently at various periods in her or his life.

Where We Are Headed: Toward Conceptual Convergence and Coherence

One pathway of conceptual entelechy available to the profession may be the integration of Eastern, i.e., non-dual, perspectives to the issue. Nelson et al. (as cited in Fontana, 2003) believes the notion that religion or spirituality can be isolated, analyzed or defined is primarily a Western concept. Indeed Kutz and Ketcham (1992)

exhibit Buddhist sensibilities by stating “when we strive to define spirituality, we discover not its limits, but our own” (cited in Cashwell, 2005 p. 198).

Within the writings of Ken Wilber, a leader in the pursuit of integrating Eastern and Western paradigms, the profession may find a frame within which to conceptualize more accurately spirituality and religion and ultimately obviate the empirical hurdles mentioned earlier. Wilber (1999/2005) characterizes the primary elements of *both* spirituality and religion as that which is *translatable* and that which is *transforming*. That is, the current conceptualizations of religion and spirituality can both be reduced to Wilber’s constructs of *translation* and *transformation*.

Religion and/or spirituality as translation provides one with a schema with which to think, feel and behave, a filter of belief through which to derive meaning. Translation orients the individual in a paradigm and allows for the creation of meaning through myths, rituals, and narratives that synthesize existence into a comfortable and navigable form. Spiritual and/or religious translation is described by Wilber as a horizontal motion of the self, a movement by which the belief in the myths, rituals and doctrine consoles, fortifies and defends the self from the inherent angst and existential doubt of the human condition. According to Wilber, translative religion and spirituality provides *legitimacy* to one’s beliefs and worldview. Wilber’s construct of translation encompasses the Table 1 descriptors of meaning, purpose, universal experience, compassion, hope, internal experience, and inner fulfillment as well as the subjective, experiential, existential, individual, life-enhancing, and natural. Translation is also consistent with the Table 2 descriptors of beliefs, organization, doctrine, systems of belief, explanation of the mystical, as well as the institutional, denominational, external, ritualistic and public.

Transformative spirituality and/or religion (Wilber, 1999/2005) is pure transcendence to higher states of consciousness, the highest form of pure actualization. Transformation results in a reconstruction of consciousness, a radical liberation from an individual’s sense of self. Transformation is vertical movement, a holistic deepening wherein one’s self is unified and integrated into a phenomenological experience that is deeply open, transcendently compassionate,

and present. According to Wilber, whereas translation provides *legitimacy*, transformative spirituality and/or religion provides true *authenticity* to one's beliefs and world view. Transformative religion and/or spirituality, in the language of Buber (1958), is the mystical experience of I and Thou, and in the language Tillich (1952), full participation in the Ground of Being. Transformative spirituality and/or religiousness is/are rare and only attained by a small minority, yet referenced within all of the great religious/spiritual traditions.

Wilber maintains that both translation and transformation are indispensable to individuals and society. Translation is a necessary developmental process for health and wellness. Those who cannot attain basic spiritual and/or religious translation live in a world that does not make sense at the deep levels, a world in which the ego is unprotected. According to Wilber, this will ultimately lead to neurosis or psychosis. For those individuals who strive for higher states of development, e.g., Maslow's self-actualizers, translation alone will lose its ability to satisfy. These are the few who will seek out a path to transformation. Transformation is a developmental process. It begins with translation and requires immense cognitive and behavioral discipline. Therefore the descriptors from Tables 1 and 2 that apply to transformation are connectedness, inner wholeness, the transcendental/transcendent, integral, multidimensional, ecumenical, private, and spontaneous as well as all of the descriptors that were applied earlier to translation.

The concepts of translation and transformation greatly illuminate the nature of the discussion. Wilber's constructs offer a more precise understanding of spirituality and religion, while at the same time embracing both concepts in a broad and more balanced manner. Perhaps the question the literature should be asking is not how to isolate and measure the distinction between the concepts of spirituality and religion, but rather what are the outcomes of spiritual/religious abstinence, spiritual/religious translation or spiritual/religious transformation? If Wilber's constructs of translation and transformation are indeed more accurate renderings, in both phenomenological and ontological ways, then there is no longer any justification for the literature to accept the assumption that meaningful and significant differences exist between the concepts of spirituality and religion. Were the research to discontinue

polarizing the constructs of spirituality and religion into narrow and biased conceptualizations, and instead address translation and transformation as qualitative variances of one protean construct, the problems mentioned earlier by Wunthrow (1998), Zinnbauer et al. (1999), Pargament (2002), Hill and Pargament (2003), and Sperry and Shafranske (2005) might find resolution, allowing for new energy and fresh insight to guide future empirical literature.

Summary

This article began by examining the shift in the conceptualization of the constructs of religion and spirituality from William James to the Summit on Spirituality. Departing from James, the current literature was reviewed to demonstrate a polarization that has occurred whereby spirituality is characterized in dynamic, broad, convivial language, and religion is characterized by narrow, axiomatic, and restrictive language. This article then supported Sperry and Shafranske's (2005) and Ingersoll and Bauer's (2004) assertion that the strong distinction between the concepts is unbalanced, and given the work of Zinnbauer, et al. (1997) and Scott (as noted in Zinnbauer, et al., 1999) is unwarranted. Next, this article explored the philosophical assumptions of modernism and postmodernism that inform the current polarization and reviewed the problems that empirical research must navigate as a result. Finally, a pathway of convergence and coherence was offered, grounded in Wilber's (1999/2005) constructs of transformative and translative spirituality/religiosity.

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