

European Network of Research on Religion, Spirituality and Health

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Editorial

Dear colleagues, dear friends

With this new issue of our newsletter we are starting the fourth year of communication and networking. We decided to put a focus on basic concepts in religion, spirituality and health research. Franz Fischer is going to share theological, etymological as well as empirical aspects on spirituality and related terms. I thank Franz Fischer for his contribution and encourage your feedbacks and discussion.

The audio-CD of the first European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health is completed and can be ordered on the conference website <http://www.rsh08.eu>.

René Hefti, MD

Topic

Spirituality – what are we talking about

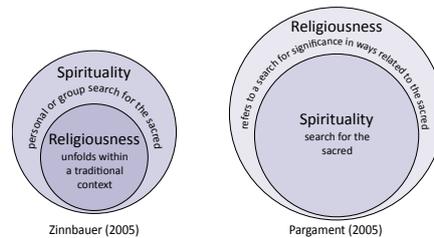
Etymology and Usage

The term spirituality derives from the Latin adjective *spiritualis*, which stands for the biblical word *pneumatikos*. Spirituality as a noun can therefore roughly be translated as „a practice of life which is in compliance with the Holy Spirit“. Around 1980, people began to use the term spirituality more often to describe their own individual and experience-based religiousness.

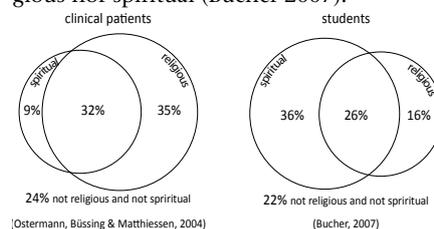
Spirituality and Religiousness

Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005) introduced two basic possibilities to determine the relationship between religiousness and spirituality. It is open to the researcher whether to use religiousness or spirituality as the broader and more comprehensive concept. Zinnbauer recommends using the former: „spirituality is defined as a personal

or group search for the sacred. Religiousness is defined as a personal or group search for the sacred that unfolds within a traditional sacred context“. Pargament, on the other hand, says: „[...] spirituality is a search for the sacred. Religiousness refers to a search for significance in ways related to the sacred“



Both seem to determine spirituality as a „search for the sacred“, but they define religiousness either in a broad or in a narrow way. This discussion reflects the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation. Empirical research shows that the terms spirituality and religiousness overlap: there are people who call themselves spiritual but not religious, others think they are more religious than spiritual and some say they are spiritual as well as religious. Ostermann, Büssing and Matthiessen (2004) found that 9% of clinical patients called themselves spiritual but not religious. Thirty-five percent of the patients said they are religious but not spiritual and 32% of the patients thought they are both. The last 24% said that they are neither religious nor spiritual. Interviews with students of the Universities of Fribourg (CH) and Salzburg (AU) draw a totally different picture: 26% said they are religious and spiritual, 36% only spiritual, 16% only religious and 22% neither religious nor spiritual (Bucher 2007).



The differences in the empirical data between clinical patients and students indicate that the younger generation thinks of itself as less religious and more spiritual.

The broader terminology

Additional terms are used for the determination of spirituality and religiousness, which also need to be defined and described – for example the meaning of the word „holiness“. Some of these terms are explained in more detail below.

Religion and Religiousness

Religiousness is defined as the practical execution of a religion by a person. There is no substantial, generally accredited definition of religion. Not every religion has a god or gods. Therefore, terms like „the sacred“, „transcendent“, „significance“ and „meaning“ are used to describe the core of a certain religion.

Determining the function of religion is easier: it is generally acknowledged that religion helps us to cope with contingencies (German: *Kontingenzbewältigung*), for example with random, coincidental or accidental events. It gives orientation in different ways to deal with situations and events for which we have no explanation, by imparting a sense for the wholeness of life experience. It is left open how this wholeness is defined or seen in a certain religion.

The Sacred

The sacred means elusiveness, which is withdrawn from the direct access of human activity. It refers to a force on which human action is totally dependent. Rudolf Otto (1917) analysed subjective emotions which are evoked when a person is in contact with the sacred. The augustness and elusiveness of the sacred send shudders through us humans (eerie and repulsive moments, *mysterium tremendum*), which in the same moment are linked to a feeling of devoted trust (fascinated-appealing moment, *mysterium fascinans*). Otto says that these experiences

transcend reason and sanity. They cannot be captured in words. This discussion, activated by Otto, about the determination of the content of the sacred continues until today. It is still not clear whether to define the sacred as a religious sphere which has to be differentiated from the profane, or not. But we can say that humans have a general sensory perception of another solid reality as a fundamental experience. This can be found in every culture and seems to be the requirement for a meaningful human existence.

Transcendence

Transcendence, from the Latin word *transcendere* (engl.: to cross) first of all describes the simple crossing of a border. In antiquity, people originally used the word transcendence as a general term for everything that exists outside of the cosmos. Scholastic thinking in the Middle Ages understood transcendence simply as something that exceeds material substance. The soul, for example, was seen as something transcendent. Nowadays, the transcendent is no longer simply defined as something that exceeds non-transcendence. Concerning religious psychology, Flournoy (1903) said that a psychologist of religious psychology has to neither verify nor to question the existence of an autonomous religious object (God, angels, spirits, etc.). This judgement would be outside of his or her reference. A psychologist of religious psychology has to assume that a person has religious experiences which have to be studied impartially, unbiasedly, and exactly. This statement is called the principle of the exclusion of transcendence.

If transcendence means crossing a border, then this border cannot be understood as something absolute. To be able to recognize a border as such, it already has to be crossed with one method or another. A fence, for example, can be recognized as a border, because it can be crossed visually but not physically. To discuss transcendence in this context, we look at the two methods of experiencing and thinking. In the context of spirituality, transcendence describes something which can be experienced, but is not really imaginable. It can at best be paradoxically circumscribed.

Unity

Unity is an important spiritual experience. Theological unity is a central concept. In every monotheistic religion, God is seen as one. In the Middle Ages, mysticism was

characterised by a threefold way, which was formulated by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (late 5th century): first of all there is the way of purification (*via purgativa*), then the way of enlightenment (*via illuminativa*) and last but not least the way of unity (*via unitiva*). With the beginning of modern times, the aim of a spiritual way is no longer seen to be the experience of unity, but more as an active and operative engagement in the world: *contemplativus in actione* (Ignatius of Loyola, 1491-1556).

In discursive thinking, total unity is not comprehensible, because something can only be thought and comprehended in separation from something else. Therefore, something can at most be thought of if it is not nothing. We see that a second unit (something and nothing) is necessary so that thinking about one unit is possible. Nicholas of Kues (1401-1464) therefore calls god the "non-other" (*non aliud*): this can only be imagined when identity and difference unite. In our experience, this paradoxical relationship in a way reflects the experience of unity which is at the same time the experience of universal connectivity.

Significance and Meaning

The two terms significance and meaning describe what a human being strives for in his or her existential profoundness. Pargament and Paloutzian gave two definitions of these terms. The former describes religion „as a process, a search for significance in ways related to the sacred“ (1997). Paloutzian says religion „provides people with ultimate meaning in life [...], centred on what the individual perceives to be sacred“ (2005). When we look at these definitions carefully, we see that the functional aspect of religion is described. The terms „significance“ and „meaning“ are in accordance with the „Kontingenzbewältigung“ (coping with contingencies, vide supra).

Summary

Spirituality stands for the alignment to elusiveness, which essentially concerns the human being. This is also called „the sacred“. It can be seen and experienced as transcendence as well as all-inclusive unity. A human being experiences this alignment as deeply meaningful. It helps him to cope with the existential experience of the contingency of being.

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References

References are published at www.rish.ch/pdf/Newsletter2009-References.pdf.

Announcements

International Psychology of Religion Conference

August, 23-27, 2009

Vienna, Austria

Organisation: International Association for the Psychology of Religion, www.iapr.de
Contact: Sebastian Murken, smurken@mainz-online.de

2nd European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health

May, 13-15, 2010

Bern, Switzerland

The Conference aims to enhance the interdisciplinary dialogue between medicine, neuroscience and theology. Experts will give comprehensive overviews on recent topics, covering physical as well as mental health.

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Pre-Conference Research Workshop with Prof. Koenig

May, 9-12, 2010

Preceding the European Conference on Religion and Spirituality there will be the opportunity to participate in a 4-day research workshop with Prof. Harold Koenig.

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Impressum

This Newsletter is published quarterly by the Research Institute of Spirituality and Health, Langenthal, Switzerland.

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