Expanding Horizons for Spirituality Research[1]

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ABSTRACT: *This analytic essay calls attention to challenging needs and stimulating opportunities for disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary research on spirituality, a topic that cuts across and is relevant to all of the world's religious faiths. Organized under eleven categories of the current state of the art, it provides a platform for future studies. Its provocative suggestions, predictions, and warnings relate to interacting perspectives on conceptual, comparative, theoretical, theological, political, scientific, methodological, professional, evaluative, and ethical issues, all of which are interlinked with each other and to interpretations of the central issue, humanity's spiritual nature. The more we learn about spirituality and its all-embracing scope, the vaster, more complex, and more comprehensive are its recognized challenges for further research. It offers huge opportunities for future studies and for improving practical applications that serve individuals, associations, nations, and global society.*

KEYWORDS: Spirituality – Religion – Health - Human Nature - Research Opportunities – Theology - Future Trends - Research Methods

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A rising crescendo of interest in spirituality has been especially evident during the past

quarter century. Attention to it has crept into innumerable though widely scattered political, academic, and therapeutic domains of life as well as popular cultural, sports, news, and entertainment outlets. Some of the widespread attention may be a product of profitable marketeering, but the filtering process of "all the news that's fit to report" suggests that certain aspects of spirituality may be as attention getting as unique criminal events and tragedies that receive weeks of public attention while myriads of altruistic acts are ignored.

Centuries of studying religion have included aspects of spirituality, although usually not under that label, so spirituality research is a relatively new phenomenon. Its roots were deepening by the 1970s (Moberg 1979), but until the 1980s most social scientists and other researchers ignored the spiritual nature of humanity (Moberg 1986). Since then investigations of spirituality have mushroomed (see, e.g., Ribaudo and Takahashi 2008; Koenig 2008, and the huge handbook by Koenig, McCullough, and Larson, 2001). We now have reached a point at which fully keeping up with relevant work on the subject is more than a full-time task.

The shift of attention toward recognizing its importance in human affairs is largely a product of empirical research that demonstrated the importance of contributions of religion and spirituality to health and well-being. It also reflects growing recognition of the prominent role of religion in world affairs and the diminished faith in secularization theories. While its development may not be a spiritual revolution (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), it may be a scientific revolution (Kuhn 1996) inside several disciplines. It is like a new enlightenment that can be likened to removing cataracts from the "spiritually blind" or lighting a candle in a dark room.

My goal is to provide every reader -- even those who already know far more than I about specialized aspects of the huge subject -- with at least a few productive nibbles of nourishment

for thought and action. Everything mentioned is like an explicit or implicit challenge to extend

current research by launching new studies from the platform of previous findings and feedback

loops from earlier research on spirituality.

New vistas for such research continually appear. Despite my own six decades of ever-

expanding observations and research experience, I still occasionally react, "It's amazing. I've

seen that a hundred times but never recognized its relevance." Sharing easily overlooked data

and ambiguously veiled perspectives together with future expectations and predictions of new

developments introduces countless challenges for further study, reflection, amplification, and

refinement of research in the vast domain called spirituality.

This survey of issues that point to desirable future studies merely skims the surface and is

not a 1-2-3 list of specific projects. Instead it challenges readers, all of whom have unique

interests and different opportunities in a broad range of diverse contexts, to look beyond the

current boundaries and horizons of the state of the art of spirituality research. It encourages them

to creatively re-examine the foundations of the research, extend its scope, improve its quality,

and strengthen its impact on therapeutic, scholarly, scientific, and other applications. I hope all

will discover edifying surprises and published resources that will stimulate their current and

future research and thus help them improve professional services to meet human needs.[2]

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

The study of spirituality has so many languages and dialects that it is like a modern

Tower of Babel. The professional literature of numerous disciplines is rife with verbal

definitions; scholars using the same spirituality-related words frequently have diverse

interpretations and assumptions about their meanings even when they share the same dictionary.

Some use "spirituality" as a popular label for whatever is or seems to be part of a physiological, psychological, sociological, astrophysical, biochemical, genetic, or other "reality," thus limiting it to a domain of exclusively empirical phenomena. Others hold presuppositions and commitments that focus directly upon ephemoral phenomena, viewing them as epistemologically "real" in their own right. The research therefore overflows with operational definitions and explications of spirituality and its components. Complex differences across cultures and subcultures, disciplines and professions, and even gender and politics complicate the picture.

Cataloguing the definitions of spirituality is a huge and challenging but important unfinished task. What once was subsumed under the concept of "religion" is increasingly divided into two major categories. *Spirituality* is most often the label for the ineffable, transcendent, and private aspects, including the interiorized or intrinsic commitments, values, beliefs, feelings, and purpose or meaning of life of individual persons. Ǒ Murchǔ (1998), for example, focuses his efforts to "retrieve the long-lost, subverted tradition of spirituality" on emphasizing its primary significance in the search for meaning and purpose in life. The other label, *Religion,* incorporates mainly the extrinsic and collective aspects of worship, rituals, creeds, organizational structures, and institutional processes. Nevertheless, the two have so many overlapping components that some researchers and scholars prefer instead to use *Religion/Spirituality* as their label.

Interpreting spirituality as a form of intelligence, Emmons (2000) describes it as a set of two capacities and three abilities that enable people to solve problems and attain goals in their everyday lives, capacities for transcendence and for engaging in virtuous behavior plus the abilities to enter into heightened spiritual states of consciousness, to utilize spiritual resources for solving problems in living, and to invest everyday activities and relationships with a sense of the

sacred. Emmons (2005) therefore recommends that research to measure spirituality and religion should frame the subjective quality-of-life through personal goals.

Paulsell (2007) has proposed that the working definition of spirituality is like the elusive square root of minus one. Whenever we try to define its boundaries, it resists precise definition and slips away, so our most eloquent equations are unable to account for its lived experience. Pernicious dichotomies, such as those of heart over head, practice over theory, and spirituality over religion, become weapons in fruitless intellectual battles. They ought to be replaced by the epistemological humility and creativity needed for comparative evaluations that recognize all dimensions and use more precise definitions in their various sociocultural settings, disciplines, methodologies, theories, theologies, and spiritual applications.

Ellor (2010) reminds us that the term *spiritual* is now used (1) in a lay-popularist approach that implies spirituality is tied to that which is greater than we are and (2) in the understanding that spirituality is transcendent, involving something personally meaningful and greater (usually a divine being) than the person. He thinks its interpretations, with mystical and rational practices shaped around personal expression, may be creating a new landscape of religious and spiritual programs and services.

Many Americans seem more interested in their personally customized spirituality than in Christianity or any other religion, so they create personal faiths that are individually shaped by themselves as unchallenged "spiritual autocrats" who define truth and reality in their own way (Barna 2009b; see Kinnaman and Lyons 2007). No longer can community leaders and researchers assume that nearly every American understands the core tenets of the Christian faith and the language and teachings of the Bible, as was true of earlier generations. Misconceptions, half-truths, and erroneous information about them are often passed along in email chain letters

and other private and public communication channels.

The diversity and multiplicity of concepts and perspectives on spirituality increases the importance of clearly specifying the definitions used, especially when comparing or collating interview findings, collecting observational investigations, making recommendations for clinical or other applications, or summarizing the results of literary, historical, theological, religious, and social research.

Types of Spirituality

Even a casual survey of popular and professional literature reveals a wide range of labels for subcategories and types of spirituality, each reflecting a specialized range of perspectives. Among these are *Active Spirituality* (Swindoll 1994) grounded in a divine perspective that begins and ends with God because it discovers up-to-date insights for coping with life situations in the human interest stories of the Bible; *Ecumenical Spirituality* (Wainwright 1986a) based upon the prayer for Christian unity; *Embodied Spirituality* (Flory and Miller 2007) in which people seek personal spiritual experience and fulfillment within a community of believers whose meaning in life is constructed and directed outward in service to others (see also Hall 2010); *Engaged Spirituality* (Nangle 2008) that bridges a person's private journey with the suffering of others in a messy, disorganized world; the holistic and grace-filled *Evangelical Spirituality* (Scorgie 2011) that encompasses relational, transformational, and vocational dynamics while recognizing differences between its Pietist, Reformed, Holiness, and Pentecostal varieties; *Feminist Spirituality* (Chittister 1998) which connects women's struggles for peace and justice in the face of sexism, racism, and homophobia; *Holistic Spirituality* (Woodhead 2007) that sacralizes subjective life and fosters a sense of self-worth; *Integral Spirituality* with Wilber's (2006) four

quadrants and eight primordial perspectives for perceiving reality; *Natural Spirituality* that according to Ellis (2009) shuns all appeals to the supernatural, is equivalent to misrecognized existential self-esteem, and contrasts with any *Non-natural Spirituality* that pursues a literal immortality; *Pastoral Spirituality* (Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold 1986, pp.563-592) that emphasizes its role in the care of souls; *Relational Spirituality* (Davis et al. 2009) that considers how the spirituality of a victim affects his or her response to a transgressor; *Scientific Spirituality* that Helminiak (1996) focuses on human consciousness with spirituality as a normative discipline on the boundary between theology and psychology; *Secular Spirituality* which emphasizes humanistic aspects of life and experience that go beyond a purely materialist view of the world to emphasize such qualities as love, compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, responsibility, harmony, and concern for others (Spirituality 2011); *Visual Spirituality* (Flanagan 2007) that paradoxically with spiritual sight envisages the invisible world that cannot be seen with the bodily eye, and *Workplace Spirituality* (Giacalone, Jurkiewicz, and Fry 2005) which is a rapidly growing area of new inquiry in the organizational sciences (see also Granberg-Michaelson 2006; Bubna-Litic 2009; Lambert III 2009).

In addition, differences between various religions are reflected by the use of their respective names (Hindu, Jewish, Shinto, etc.) as modifying adjectives. *Buddhist Spirituality,* for example, reflects the longing to be freed from suffering and to realize equanimity of mind from its postulate that all beings, events, and things are interconnected. It embodies an "understanding that ancestral wisdom is the source of both a faith tradition (which is communal) and spirituality (which is private)" (Nakasone, 2010, p. 12).

The closest Confucian parallel to Western spirituality may be "the cultivation of one's moral life such that one could live in harmonious relation with other human beings and the whole

cosmos" (Pui-Lan 2007, p. 82). Traditional popular Chinese religiosity generally interprets religion and spirituality as a syncretistic blending of elements from Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions, so combining Confucian philosophy with Christian faith is not uncommon.

Christian Spirituality is undoubtedly the most extensively and intensively studied and elaborated of all subtypes (see Scorgie 2011). Sheldrake's (2006) dictionary defines it as "the ways in which the particularities of Christian beliefs about God, the material world, and human identity find expression in basic values, lifestyles, and spiritual practices." Howard's (2008) comprehensive textbook refers to three types of definitions: At the level of practice Christian spirituality is a lived relationship with God; at the level of dynamics it is the formulation of a teaching that synthesizes a way of understanding how that relationship works, and at the academic discipline level it is a formal field of study (p.16). Each of Niebuhr's (1951) five types of relationships between Christ and culture can be considered a different type of spirituality (Wainwright 1986b), as can also Wuthnow's (1998) distinctions between the spiritualities of dwelling, seeking, and practice.

Alongside these and many other varieties of spirituality are a multiplicity of scales constructed for research on specific topics, each equivalent to its own operational definition of spirituality or one of its sub-types and usually within the context of a specific discipline or profession.

PARTICULARISM AND UNIVERSALISM

Each religious and ideological group is inclined to think that only its own doctrines about what constitutes genuine or true spirituality and the ways to attain it are correct. Various alternative spiritualities, new religious movements, and individualized eclectic syntheses or

"cafeteria faiths" try to counteract their respective societies' traditional beliefs, typically claiming to retain or improve the best of all that went before them while sloughing off all the rest. Nevertheless, under the goal of producing an "All One Spirituality," they implicitly disown every alternative that similarly or competitively claims to possess irrefutable truth; they thus deny the uniqueness and veridicality of all faiths except their own.

Some researchers are trying to discover indicators of spirituality that universally apply to all people in every sociocultural and political setting on earth.[3] They believe that certain subsets of spiritual convictions, commitments, and rituals, whatever their diverse contexts and ideologies, may be shared without compromise in many, perhaps all, worldviews and religions. Among these are spiritual practices that seem very similar across religious boundaries, despite other stark differences. ***Meditation***, for example, seems to be a consistently monistic concept, but many of its numerous forms, underlying meanings, and foci of attention within each of its Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Shinto, New Age, and other contexts are considerably different. Only intensive comparative research can reveal whether their respective consequences for personal tranquility, physical and mental health, spiritual growth, and societal well-being are universally compatible and constructive or discordantly harmful.

Similarly, we can comparatively explore ***praying and prayers*** to Allah, the Hindu gods, Gaia, Mother Earth, self, and the numerous types of approaches to the God of Christianity to discover which, if any, ritualistic patterns, interiorized and publicly shared meanings, and observable consequences are unique, widely shared, or universal.

In both meditation and prayer, the focus of attention can vary widely, including inter alia self, family, friends, the natural environment, national or community prosperity, global affairs, God, the kingdom of God, or another deity. Of course, doing either, however ritually correct,

cannot reveal the favorable or unfavorable reception by the person or entity that is addressed, even though some apologists use believers' testimonials to bolster the teachings of their faith.

A peculiar paradox related to particularism and universalism is seldom recognized. On the one hand, most members of pluralistic societies take pride in the wide variety of differences present within their boundaries and the tolerance that allows them all to coexist freely. This encourages the sharpening of unique distinctions between the religious and spiritual groups. A desire for converts and the welcome offered proselytes opens doors for others to freely choose to join them. At the same time, however, minorities typically experience strong social pressures to conform to the culture patterns and ideological norms of the majority population, to accept the notion that differences between religious faiths are not important, and to insist that no group should consider its own faith commitments as better than any of the others. This relativizes all spiritualities and imposes strong inducements to reduce or eliminate the differences between spiritual subcultures. Functionally it encourages the triumph of secular humanism as a society's bland overarching religious philosophy or as its implicitly established civil religion.

Any attempt to redefine spirituality as a catch-all label for elements common to the religions and ideologies of all people groups requires the leveling process of dropping one after another of the features unique to and valued by certain of them (see Moberg 2002). For example, it strips away all concepts of the Creator God from the three monotheistic religions. It also removes from Christianity the central defining component of faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate whose earthly life was a perfect example of love and servanthood, who died for the sins of the world, who was resurrected for the justification of believers, and who will victoriously return to receive them to himself. If universalism triumphs in a society, its Christianity eventually will become only a faith tradition that overlooks or denies the truth of

many distinctive Bible teachings.

The process of reductionistic leveling leads logically to the destruction of whatever differentiates any specific spirituality from other ideologies within their subcultural ethical systems and ritualistic practices. Whatever then remains is likely to be little more than a bland mixture of vague, slippery, and duplicitous ethical and moral guidelines for conduct. In effect, adopting universalistic ideals will emasculate most, if not all, spiritualities and world religions.

The assumption that all religions are basically the same clearly downplays their uniquenesses. Retaining only that which falsely gives an appearance of uniformity will have detrimental personal and group effects. To use the words of the Dean of the Institute of Buddhist Studies, this

> … ultimately says there is no reason to examine your own tradition or make any change in your life.… If one just … muddles around, picking and choosing aspects of different traditions that one likes … then one is never confronted by how a tradition can challenge oneself to grow and change (Payne 2002, p. 2).

Ignoring fundamental differences between religious traditions, Payne adds, is a "New Age-y pick-and-choose religion" that fails to make their potential differences available to anyone and does not challenge one to really live. In contrast, he claims, Buddhism is very different. Its emphasis on emptiness ought not be glossed over for the sake of harmony.

Prothero (2010) similarly critiques the popular but intellectually false and pragmatically demeaning "Godthink" that all religions are either beautifully or dangerously the same. All of the eight rival world religions he examines share the common starting point that something is wrong with the world, but they identify different core problems, propose different goals and techniques for moving to the solution, and assign contrasting levels of importance to their rituals, ethics, and

beliefs.

Dillon (2010) similarly warns us to "be careful … of arguments depicting religion in ways downplaying its own complexity. … we should remain cognizant of how particular religious, cultural, and political encrustations complicate the standpoints of individuals, groups, and institutions as well [as] any rational assessment and accommodation of religious ideas and norms" (p. 153). It is very important to remember that respecting all religions does not necessitate the belief that they all are equivalent or the same.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

The study of spirituality has become data-rich as a result of abundant descriptive projects, but as an academic specialty it remains theory-poor (see McFadden, Brennan, and Patrick, 2003). Some of its greatest theoretical challenges pertain to understanding the influence and interrelationships of spiritual wellness, illness, and health on physical and mental well-being and other human desires and goals. Most theoretical work is best developed within the delimited contexts of relevant academic disciplines. Yet at the same time it inevitably reflects phenomenological and theological perspectives on subjects like the purpose and meaning of life, stages of spiritual development, religious reminiscence with spiritual life reviews, and coping with the problems and stresses of the human condition, including dying and death (see Murdock 2005, pp. 133-134).

An overlapping task is that of linking spirituality to the theoretical schools of thought of each academic discipline, clinical profession, and therapeutic occupation. Research to test the significance of the respective components of such theories is likely to reveal that spirituality is more important in most instances than the majority of other variables that are conventionally

recognized.

One attempt to develop a universal theory is Tornstam's (2005) gerotranscendence theory of aging, which reaches beyond the contrasting activity and disengagement orientations of gerontology to describe a developmental pattern of progression toward maturation and wisdom in late life. Included among typical changes in self definitions, social relationships, and both popular and theological understanding of existential questions are a broadening of spiritual perspectives alongside redefinitions of time, space, life, and death, sometimes with a feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe.

The broad and complex scope of perspectives on and concepts of spirituality among diverse academic disciplines, the variety of its ideological expressions and ritualistic practices across the world's cultures and subcultures, the wide range of individual differences apparent within each faith, the diversity of theological dogmas and normative ideals found in each complex religion, and dissimilarities among the academic and professional disciplines conspire together to make it unlikely that any all-encompassing theoretical interpretation of spirituality will win universal favor. Far too many philosophical, ideological, theological, and disciplinary perspectives are closely related to its theoretical interpretations and explanations.

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Theology is implicated in every aspect of studying spirituality, even if that is not recognized by most non-theologians. As a social scientist, for example, I sometimes wonder whether traditional ideological boundaries between faith communities that are defined by the doctrines of Calvinism and Arminianism, to mention but two contrasting examples of socio-religious perspectives on spirituality in Christian theology, are fading away. How many members

and clergy in the denominations that historically emerged from either of those schools of Bible interpretation actually incorporate at least a few contrasting views of the other in their personal philosophies? Is the institutional success of megachurches at least partly a product of ignoring contradictory theological dogmas or of blending spiritual elements from both? When members brought up under one theology attend congregations that ignore it or advocate its opposite, do they have a sense of unease, distrust, or lack of full commitment? Is the social solidarity of church members affected negatively or positively by the degree of theological unity or diversity evident in the beliefs of their pastor and leading members? In other words, how much do historical theological distinctions related to spirituality still matter today?

Similarly, how satisfying to people who suffer from illness, aging, disabilities, accidents, crime, unemployment, poverty, prejudice, discrimination, bereavement, loss of possessions, natural disasters, social rejection, or other causes is the explanatory theodicy taught in their faith group? Does it accentuate feelings of defeat, shame, and guilt or give them spiritual comfort and solace in the face of trauma? Does it oversimplify or satisfactorily explain the presence of evil in the world? Analogous questions apply to the spiritual and other consequences of the theological perspectives of Judaism, Islam, and other religions. (One of the most comprehensive reports on divergent theological perspectives in health care is the symposium edited by Lammers and Verhey, 1998.)

Theology itself is undergoing change as a result of the upsurge of attention to spirituality. Delio (2008) thinks that its rise as an academic discipline is stimulating a more critical understanding of theology's main focus of attention and, in effect, bringing it back to connections with the spiritual life itself in a manner similar to that of the 13th century Franciscan theologian Bonaventure (1217-1274), whose contemplative theology was both a spiritual

practice and a lived experience of grace. Delio believes that the complexities of religious pluralism, new scientific worldviews, and expanding religious consciousness push theology beyond the logic of the mind to a method of inquiry based upon "the power of the heart to feel and see," not the power of reason alone.

Graduate studies in spirituality generally prioritize abstract and theoretical thinking over engaged or applied approaches to everyday life. Those preferences rest upon dichotomous polarities, such as a spiritual vs. mundane realm, inner vs. outer existence, personal experience vs. social action, and an idealized future vs. an actual present, all of which, Sheldrake (2007) claims, are rooted in a fundamental contrast between the sacred and the secular. Instead of exclusively interiorizing spirituality, he advocates a radical reconfiguration of the sacred so that no part of human activity is inherently profane and all public and private practices of everyday life are sacred, even when dirtied by sinful actions. Doing theology then is a way of life, a form of the spiritual practice of becoming a theological person who thinks *about God,* thus thinks *of God,* and therefore becomes involved *with God.* To me, this seems fully consistent with biblical admonitions telling Christians to be filled with the Holy Spirit and live out their faith consistently everywhere and all the time. When that is done, even house cleaning and toilet scrubbing can be a meditative spiritual practice (MacLin 2010).

However, outside of the three monotheistic religions and with the possible exception of polytheism, there technically can be no theology at all if the literal meaning of that discipline is the study of God and God's relation to the world. When theology is thus delimited, only analogous concepts of "secular theology," transtheism, and philosophical studies of sacred things can relate to non-theistic religions, even though all "religious studies" are sometimes labeled as "theology." Perhaps that is why the University of Chicago Divinity School broadened its

definition to considering theology as "second order academic reflection on faith" (Padgett 2007, p. 113).

An additional issue is whether the concept of spirituality itself is so strongly linked with the Jewish and Christian Scriptures that its use in other religions is very arbitrary.[4] Much theology is a cultural product that has been strongly influenced by medieval monasticism, Luther's German translation of the Bible, and its English King James Version (Alter 2010; Noll 2010).

A widespread popular assumption is that being a member of any faith group whatsoever is equivalent to commitment to any of the other spiritual alternatives. Anyone who carefully studies religions can point to the fallacy of that conclusion simply by identifying and questioning the numerous aspects in which the respective faiths differ. For example, is Islamic submission to Allah at all equivalent to Christian salvation by God's grace through Jesus Christ? Does faith in Christ as one's personal redeemer from sin really correspond to belief in Buddha or in any of 330,000,000 Hindu gods? Are the ideological, psychological, and practical consequences of the Christian hope of resurrection the same as those of Hindu, Buddhist, or Sikh beliefs in reincarnation and transmigration of the soul?

In one sense everybody has his or her own "god," an ultimate concern or goal for living that functionally serves as an object of worship. Jewish and Christian expositors have analyzed idolatry from biblical perspectives, and comparative religion scholars have surveyed it descriptively and analytically, but to my knowledge nobody has systematically interpreted and compared its operative *theos* from the inside of each variety's respective frame of reference. What are the pragmatic and daily life effects of people's differences in the object of faith, the creeds that sustain it, and the rituals that express and reinforce it? Do all theologies have similar

or contrasting societal results? To what extent do attempts to merge spiritual faiths, as in New

Age eclecticism and individual "cafeteria religions," betray or support their original source

religions?

Social science research can help to answer theologically related questions like those. It

deserves increased linkages with the doctrinal studies of theologians, for much work in both

theology and social science is, in effect, equivalent to developing theories about spirituality. One

example useful to researchers is the comparative analysis of five historical Protestant traditions

of spirituality (Lutheran, Reformed, Wesleyan, Pentecostal, and Contemplative) that are centered

around the concept of sanctification (Alexander 1989). Each tradition is described by its

advocate, then critiqued by each of the other four theological experts. Those five plus the

addition of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Pietist, and possibly other theologies can provide

a fruitful pool of suggestive ideas and hypotheses to test when studying Christian spiritualities.

Theological Heresies, Errors, and Faults

Abuses of theology that affect spirituality are rife in the popular and religious subcultures

of Western societies and perhaps of all others. In Christianity a continual challenge for

theological hermeneutics and biblical ethics is the widespread misuse of the Bible. Lacking the

humility that comes from recognizing that "the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond

cure" (Jeremiah 17:9), for example, many Christians who idealize the Bible as the norm for

Christian faith and behavior naively assume that finding one or more Bible verses to support

their predetermined ethical, moral, or political perspective makes that viewpoint the

incontrovertible will of God. Their most serious flaw might be the error of substituting *eisegesis,*

seeking Bible verses and phrases to support preconceived ideas, for the proper *exegesis* of

deriving doctrine from whatever Scripture clearly teaches (e.g., see Ward 2004).

The American culture subverts many core values of Christianity by elevating ideals like consumerism, pragmatism, self-sufficiency, individualism, positive thinking, personal prosperity, and nationalism and by trivializing God through using the Deity as a means for achieving selfish ends of individuals or groups (Horton 2008). Peterson (2003), Bible translator of *The Message*, claims that any version of Christianity that is without Jesus tends to degenerate into a "sloppy subjectivism" that tempts people to invent their own idolatrous gods, most commonly those that reflect "the culture of self-help and sell-sovereignty."

News about sexual immorality, greedy financial rip offs, commercial exploitation, and other hypocritical shenanigans by a few pastors, priests, and televangelists is widely disseminated because such behavior is so inconsistent with their religious roles. Much less attention is given to whether Christians ought also to ask whether any of the interpretations of biblical teachings they apply to practical ethics and morality in fact actually violate central truths of biblical doctrine because they result from erroneous hermeneutical principles.

Theological scholarship can benefit greatly from the relevant studies of other disciplines. Linguists, philosophers, and social scientists, e.g., can help to determine which changes of spiritual thought and practice are merely adaptations to changing language and cultural circumstances, which are sacrilegious syncretisms that constitute heretical perversions undermining the core integrity of the religion, and which are consistent with their biblical, creedal, or other criteria of "the true faith."

PLURALISM AND POLITICS

The spiritualities of pluralistic societies like the USA overlap significantly with politics

and the worldviews of global society, the most prominent of which are deism, naturalism, nihilism, existentialism, Christian theism, Eastern pantheistic monism, New Age spirituality without religion, postmodernism, and Islamic theism (Sire 2009). Each "worldview involves the mind, but it is first of all a commitment, a matter of the soul. It is a spiritual orientation more than it is a matter of mind alone" (p. 20). Therefore its central focus is its answers to questions about spirituality in relationship to reality, humanity, the world, and the universe. Often "hidden in plain sight," worldviews typically are absorbed through cultural contacts rather than adopted by the rational evaluation of competing intellectual systems (Wilkens and Sanford 2009; their eight worldviews are individualism, consumerism, nationalism, moral relativism, scientific naturalism, the New Age, postmodern tribalism, and salvation by therapy).

Alongside and overlapping with worldviews are the seven dominant "faith tribes" of the American people that Barna Research Group surveys have identified: Casual Christians, Captive Christians, Jews, Mormons, Pantheists, Muslims, and Skeptics (Barna 2009a). While their shared values hold the nation together, a focus on differences tends to drive it apart, contributing among other changes to modifications of the Hippocratic Oath in medicine (Rusthoven 2010).

Since early history people have created their own gods, making self-seeking greed, power, or personal pleasure their functional god or summum bonum. (Genesis 3:1-24 reports an early example.) Some who attempt to exclude all religion from spirituality unwittingly make that goal their religion, while others become advocates of another pseudo-theistic or non-theistic religion. From the perspective of defining a person's ultimate concern as her or his religion, even atheism is a "religious faith" (Geisler and Turek 2004).

Isomae (2005) has emphasized that the term "Japanese religion" is incongruous. A well educated devout Hindu I recently met similarly declared, "Of course, Hinduism is not a

religion," a statement that another Indian clarified by saying, "Hinduism is a way of life." Atchley's (2009) recent text on spirituality and aging allegedly "looks at spirituality as a topic separate from religion" (p. 8), yet it repeatedly advocates spiritual practices of Buddhists and Quakers, both of which are usually classified as religions. (Perhaps an analogue is various Christian groups that insist they are a "fellowship," "church body," "assembly," or some other entity, but neither a sect nor a denomination.)

Many local and international political tensions related to religion reflect the global spread of religious pluralism with its competing views of religions that center around the freely chosen personal faith of individuals versus those which assume a person's religious choices should be exclusively limited to one's own national, ethnic, ancestral, family, or other collective heritage. The former encourage ventures to win individual converts by educationally and evangelistically sharing the faith, while authorities of the latter do all they can to prevent their members' exposure to any religious option other than remaining within the established religion. Their efforts to define even the most elementary teaching about a spiritual faith other than the one that dominates their culture as a morally illicit, if not also illegal, form of proselytizing often succeed. In democratic societies, denying people their own free choice of a spiritual commitment can be interpreted as an egregious violation of civil liberties

Ethical issues linked with spirituality spill over into international politics, especially with respect to the freedom of missionaries, gurus, imams, and representatives of non-established religions to proselytize, propagate, or even simply share their faith in a foreign land. They also invade American politics on issues pertaining to expressions of and publicity for religion in public domains of church-state relationships, religion in education, marriage laws, moral legislation, and much more.

Clashes of traditionalists with advocates of change are rocking many Christian denominations and the body politic at large in regard to the morality of abortion, homosexual marriage, gay clergy, and other spirituality-related issues. As Islam gains strength in Western societies, there very likely will be pressure to change marriage laws in order to grant legal permission for a man to have up to four wives simultaneously as permitted by the Qur'an (Sura 4:1-4).

Fervent advocates of religiously based ethical values often work diligently to impose their "liberal" or "conservative" spiritual values on their entire society through legal or judicial channels, while advocates of contrasting ideologies strive just as hard to prevent that from happening. Whenever they attempt to influence local, national or international affairs, each opposing group emphasizes the inconsistencies of the other while capitalizing upon whatever cultural pressures, current events, and factual data support their own views.

All political groups have spiritual (and other) assumptions about what is best for the entire nation, but the positions each considers incontrovertible truth about what is beneficial for everybody are seldom impartially and thoroughly tested. On each issue, careful research to honestly compare and fairly assess pragmatic outcomes is greatly needed. So also is consideration of the ethical teachings of the jurisdiction's religions and the constitutional legality of proposed changes.

SCIENTIFIC ISSUES

Scientific research is always limited. Each discipline and specialty is constricted by a finite range of subjects, theories, methodological tools, and techniques for empirical observation. In addition, every researcher has limitations of education and training, personal interests, sensory

capabilities, imagination, creative ability, and experience. Each contends with limited opportunities for access to research data, competing obligations for the use of energy and time, and numerous practical constraints on the accessibility of resources (finances, equipment, supporting personnel, publication outlets, etc.), to mention but a few of the factors that delimit the scope and qualify the results of research on any subject, including spirituality.

Methodological, ontological, and epistemological reductionisms are endemic to all sciences, but they are especially evident in a still common refusal to acknowledge that spiritual phenomena might actually be a genuine or observable aspect of empirical reality. The failure to notice its available evidence is often a result of not seeking that which is believed to be nonexistent or at very most inconsequential. Ideological preconceptions that spirituality is either unimportant or "nothing-but-so-and-so" thus contribute to ignoring or misinterpreting whatever evidence of spirituality fortuitously appears. In its extreme logical positivist form, it assumes that the spiritual and God do not exist because they are beyond the scope of scientific empiricism. That perspective harms the scientific enterprise greatly by limiting its current and potential possibilities (Hewlett 2002).

In scientific work it usually is simpler to observe only one or two components of one's subject than to try to study its entirety, and that may apply more clearly in studies of spirituality than of any other subject because it is so easy to misinterpret and to treat any one aspect or component of spirituality as if is the whole. In addition, in a pattern analogous to biblical eisegesis, some researchers and theorists are so sure they already "know" the implications and meanings of peoples' beliefs and behaviors that they avoid the investigations needed to uncover their subjects' underlying perceptions, interpretations, and meanings. So much of spirituality is interiorized that revealing it sometimes "takes one to know one" (Frohlich 2007, p. 80).

The burgeoning attention to spirituality in biochemistry, epidemiology, gerontology, genetics, quantum and nuclear physics, brain physiology, neurology, developmental psychology, and other sciences tempts a few experts in each specialty to believe that they have uncovered the missing link, essence, or core of spirituality (see Moberg 2008 for a few references). That error, alongside the reductionism of explaining spirituality as if it is wholly within the confines of only one discipline, has a counterpart abuse in the eclecticism that engages various disciplines with no clear sense of any organizing focus of attention (Frohlich 2007). The theories, assumptions, conceptual definitions, and methods chosen to study spirituality inevitably but subtly tend to extend and strengthen certain findings and interpretations while they ignore or repress others.

The corrective role of historical and scientific studies is a common source of the alleged conflict of science and scholarship with religion, especially when the findings are incompatible with traditional teachings. The apologists for specific religious bodies sometimes search through research findings to discover data or interpretations that support or clarify their doctrines, but the research also is used by their critics to reveal inconsistencies among verified or alleged realities of the physical, social, or psychological world that suggest particular tenets of the faith need correction, modification, or rejection.

Recent revisions of the *Book of Mormon* are an example. Neither DNA tests nor archeological research could find evidence to support its teaching that Native Americans are descendents of the ten lost tribes of Ancient Israel, so portions of that sacred book of the Latter-day Saints were re-written (Clark 2007). Similarly, geological, astronomical, archeological, and other discoveries are sometimes used to modify certain interpretations of Genesis 1-11 and other Bible passages. Nevertheless, the ultimate truth of a religion cannot be firmly established by observational analyses of human behavior or other scientific research alone.

Legal requirements and administrative procedures that demand political correctness occasionally saddle scholars and scientists with restrictions on the research process or its applications. It is not inconceivable that future laws could restrict or prohibit the publication of spirituality studies that compare the inevitably unequal results and accompaniments of one faith or sect with those of others. Persons or groups displeased with such findings are likely to bring charges not only of violating political correctness but also of illegal bigotry against researchers and scholars who expose significant inequalities among the various spiritual alternatives. The best defense will include professional research expertise with its integrity of adhering to methodological norms of honesty along with respect for the research of scientists who are committed to different spiritual or religious ideologies.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

In his introduction to an eight-article section of multidisciplinary views on the study of religion and spirituality, Brennan (2009, p. 241) referred to the daunting "diversity of the religious and cultural backgrounds of the older adults we study and serve. Do existing measures work equally well with these many diverse populations, or are there inherent biases that skew our perspectives leading to erroneous conclusions …?" On the basis of similar questions, Moberg (1967, 2008, 2010) has frequently raised the issue of whether it is possible to do empirical research on such an immeasurable phenomenon as spirituality. The most significant composite evidence is Koenig's (2012) forthcoming textbook.

Because the human spirit is invisible, spirituality cannot be observed and studied directly. Like numerous other behavioral science concepts (alienation, intelligence, love, motivation, personality, social solidarity, etc.), it can be investigated only inferentially through empirical

indicators that are presumed to reflect it (Moberg 2000, 2004). Yet, largely because of the

diversity of religions, the variety of conceptual definitions, and the non-material ineffability of

its subject, there already are hundreds of scales designed to measure spirituality, its subtypes, or

its components (for early summaries see MacDonald, Friedman, and Kuentzel 1999; MacDonald,

Kuentzel, and Friedman 1999; Hill and Hood 1999). Nevertheless, significant questions about

their validity, components, indicators, comparability, and other complexities have contributed to

Moberg's (2010) conclusion that "*spirituality in each case is only whatever is measured by the*

spirituality scale under consideration. Each scale is its own operational definition" (p.109).

Most empirical research to date is from studies of people in American and European

societies that have a predominantly Christian religious heritage. Underlying assumptions of those

studies, explicit details solicited in data collection, and criteria used to differentiate desirable

from undesirable spiritual orientations all reflect Christian values that have been elaborated and

modified in their various national and subcultural settings. Therefore a significant critique of

extant research is that it focuses mainly upon Christian interpretations of spirituality and is

biased in favor of them (e.g., Glicksman 2009b; Miki 1999). Most of the measures developed for

scientific or practical purposes neither adequately nor fairly represent the spiritual values and

concepts of other religions, and even less those of atheists and non-religious people.

Researchers studying spirituality who themselves or whose subjects are non-Christians,

including religious "nones," often are uneasy with the implicitly Christian ideological

assumptions about the meaning and nature of spirituality, their influence on the methodological

approaches of most research, and their relevance to roles in the lives of people. Glicksman

(2009a), for example, has fervently called attention to the predominance of "evangelical

Protestant" themes in most research, its contrasts with the values of American Judaism, the

limited content coverage of scales that measure religiousness and spirituality, and the need for

improved linkages with specific historical and experiential contexts of faith in the lives of

research subjects. Few, if any, good researchers can disagree with his conclusion that, instead of

changelessly perpetuating privileged methodological approaches, each research question must

drive its method:

> … different methods are appropriate for different questions, and … some may be best
>
> answered using quantitative methods, other historical investigation, etc. … No statistical
>
> analysis or biblical exegesis can ever fully explore the meaning of faith. To do that we
>
> must understand faith itself, in its infinite varieties, and the ways in which each human
>
> shapes his or her own faith in a constant dynamic between eternal truths and an ever-
>
> changing world (Glicksman 2009b, p. 317).

Glicksman's recommendations reinforce the recognition that spirituality research is both

an inter- and trans-disciplinary subject and must become even more so. His critique also

demonstrates how important theological doctrines and philosophical values are for understanding

the faith-related behavior of any group and how easily they are misinterpreted by outsiders

(Moberg 2009). "The multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm and religion as a meaning system

will serve as good conceptual guides to link research done at different levels, from different

disciplines, and within diverse religions and cultures" (Park and Paloutzian 2005, p. 560).

All investigations of spirituality benefit from cooperation and cross-fertilization to share

the insights, data, theories, methodologies, clinical applications, and professional evaluations of

outcomes that flow from both quantitative and qualitative empirical research in the behavioral,

social, biological, epidemiological, and health sciences. Studies in the humanities, especially

history, literature, philosophy, theology, and comparative religions, also challenge and reinforce

the scientific investigations. The research must always be reported honestly without covering up findings that displease sponsors or seem to clash with the researchers' ideological commitments. Spiritual struggles and the negative outcomes of programs intended to promote wholesome spirituality must be as openly presented as those that are positive (see Exline and Rose 2005).

The observational methods and techniques used in each study focus attention upon selected aspects of spirituality and thus tend to serve as blinders that obscure others. In addition, the interests, perspectives, experiences, and attention of persons who are committed members inside a group or culture inevitably are different from those of its outsiders. Researchers who investigate spiritual phenomena among people outside of their own in-groups therefore have values, perceptions, and observational limitations that make it difficult, if not impossible, to fully understand and empathize with the indigenous people. Even if an outsider is committed to objectivity, his or her etic views are different from and sometimes clash with the emic views of insiders who are the research subjects (Headland, Pike, and Harris 1990).

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE ISSUES

Many comments above have obvious implications for professional practice. Some reflect spirituality research and its complications while others clarify its natural role in the normal course of serving human needs. In spite of the difficulties of incorporating explicit forms of spiritual interventions in the on-going provision of goods and services, various techniques and tools for nurturing spirituality are now used in secular as well as sectarian agencies. Some of the professional applications view spirituality as either a "dimension" or a God-focused goal of religion. Others try to avoid God concepts by drawing instead upon what they interpret as a non-religious spirituality centered upon meaning-making and intentional consciousness (see

Helminiak 2006).

In psychology, a profession that once treated religiosity as a symptom of mental abnormality, the contributions of spirituality to well-being are increasingly recognized in both its clinical and counseling applications (Richards and Bergin 1997; Paloutzian and Park 2005). Spirituality is becoming an integral feature of social work practice (Moody 2005; Rothman 2009), and it has always been a part of pastoral care and chaplaincy ministries. Spiritual care is integral to nursing practice (Carson and Koenig 2008), a central component of palliative therapy (Puchalski and Ferrell 2010), and an important aspect of caring for chronically ill and dying patients (Puchalski 2006).

Cultural variations compound religious dissimilarities to create profound differences even within Western societies (MacKinlay 2010), so acknowledging and applying the importance of spirituality to well-being poses numerous problems for healthcare services. In pluralistic societies, understanding the beliefs of divergent religions about the needs of ill and dying patients helps caretakers make appropriate adaptations to prayer and other spiritual practices that provide comfort (Fosarelli 2008).

Koenig (2007) has demonstrated that one way to apply research findings in medical practice and other health care services is to clarify the why, how, when, and what of integrating spirituality into patient-centered clinical practice. Among his solutions to the diversity of religious and spiritual commitments found in nearly every community is the recommendation that a spiritual inventory or history become part of the healthcare intake process in order to benefit each patient by recognizing and acting upon any personally unique spiritual and religious issues that arise during therapy (Koenig 2004). Critics, however, claim that this procedure is too expensive and increases the possibilities of bias and discriminatory conduct by healthcare staff.

A significant opponent to including religion and spirituality in medical services is Sloan (2006) who claims that linking religion and medicine is an unholy alliance based upon blind faith. He calls attention to the limitations of research, which always reveals outliers and exceptions to findings like those that generally demonstrate predominantly wholesome effects of spirituality upon health and well-being. Biases easily intrude in the process of collecting and using the spiritual histories of patients. Physicians lack training and competency for spiritual interventions, which also amplify the time needed for data gathering and physician-patient discussions, thus increasing financial costs. Sloan also believes that inquiries into a patient's beliefs and practices constitute an invasion of privacy, so they must never become a standard part of clinical practice.

Lawrence (2002b) opposes physicians' assessing and directing the spirituality of patients because of radical differences between science and religion. Agnostics and members of religions unknown to the physician are likely to experience discrimination. Not only do physicians lack appropriate training, but Yes/No answers on routine intake forms trivialize the task. He alleges that patients are reluctant to disclose deeply held values and beliefs. "Even the best ministers and chaplains among us, after years of academic and clinical training, find the taking of spiritual histories a complex one" (p. 74). Therefore, he claims, it is unreasonable to expect a physician to be competent for decoding impenetrable semiotics that well-trained clergy find difficult.

Others, however, take a positive approach, indicating how and under which conditions it is appropriate to include faith therapeutically, sensitively, and ethically in medicine and other helping professions (see, e.g., Orr 2009). Good clinical work is not dependent upon a cookie-cutter guide to meet each labeled category of human need (see Lawrence 2002a). Instead it draws upon the provider's entire lifetime experience, using educational, technological, theological,

philosophical, and practical training and expertise to do whatever seems best for the total well-being of each client.

No simple set of techniques and procedures fits the clinical applications of spirituality in all caring professions, largely because each has its own specialties and every client and setting is unique (see Moberg 2001). Possibly the best solution is to view religious and spiritual issues with insights gleaned from both one's profession and a good liberal arts education that provide a solid background for individualized adaptations to fit the context and circumstances of each person and incident, whenever and however the occasion arises.

In the context of Christianity, using spirituality as an intervention for illness, disabilities, accidents, and other problems has significant limitations, even though doing so has the benefit of a long history of Christian thought and practice (Bloesch 2007). Its main danger is transforming the faith into a maneuverable commodity by reducing it to the equivalent of a medical prescription or set of spiritual exercises to promote well being, or else by treating God like an instrument or servant whose role is to give people whatever they want (Shuman and Meador 2003, pp. 107-109).

The frequently confirmed salubrious effects of Christian spirituality may be compromised or completely lost when it is changed from an end that usually has wholesome serendipitous effects into a means for attempting to achieve selfish outcomes. Research is needed to explore whether the same applies to the beneficial effects of every other faith. I expect to find that those in which faith expressions consist mainly of overt religious rituals and spiritual practices differ significantly from those that consider internalized faith as their central or highest feature and that both will be distinct from groups that emphasize doing good for God, society, and other people.

Whatever holds true, the goals of spiritual restoration and renewal are easily subverted in

program implementations. Displacements of ultimate ends and means can occur even among

holistic faith-based service providers as a result of their obligation to focus on immediate needs

of their clients (Sager 2011).

A broad foundation for professional interventions and referrals enables the appropriate

use of spirituality data as a screening tool to fit each patient and incident. An excellent handbook

that includes spiritual sensitivities of many groups and is useful in all human service professions

is the cultural pocket guide for clinical care by Lipson and Dibble (2005). Although the ethical

questions associated with professional applications seldom can be resolved by simple recourse to

scientific data alone, the enlightenment of carefully designed evaluative studies is greatly

needed.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT ISSUES

Evaluating the interventions and outcomes of professional services that deal with the

spiritual aspects of such conditions as wellness and illness, suffering and disability, and religious

or spiritual growth and distress is a major challenge for health services, chaplaincies, pastoral

care, clinical psychology, social work, and other human service professions. Numerous questions

arise: When are explicitly spiritual interventions needed? Which ones conform to professional,

legal, and ethical standards, and which do not? Under what conditions does the service offered

promote health, happiness, spiritual growth, or other goals, and when does it instead become

only an advocate for a specific religious sect or pseudo-religious therapeutic cult? For best

results, how ought spiritual therapy be offered? For which clients might it do more harm than

good? Can degrees of success or failure be measured? Similar questions apply to monitoring

volunteer services and the generous non-professional activities of family members, friends, and

others who offer spiritual support.

The processes and procedures for evaluating spirituality, both within and across ideologies and religions, are very complicated, but even more basic, indeed crucial, in research is determination of the standards by which the spiritual wellness, maturity, or wholeness of people is measured or diagnosed. Basic questions about the definitions of good health, normal healing, holistic wellness, and spiritual maturity are implicated in all spirituality-related therapeutic, preventive, and educational interventions. They also raise significant questions for researchers.

In Western societies, many of the criteria commonly used are direct or indirect derivatives of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21), and some in turn are applications of the closely related "Golden Rule": "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31). Similar teachings can be found in other religions (Robinson 2010), but however alike the faiths may seem on the surface, comparisons of the specific attitudes toward violence, respect for life, sexuality, genetics, and religious law in Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism raise significant questions about claims that morality is autonomous or based on intrinsically human connections to religious ethical traditions (Ward 2008).

The "good" of one subculture sometimes is the "bad" or "evil" of another (see Grant 2006). Those differences can become exceptionally sensitive in religiously pluralistic societies. Even when there are clearly established criteria for evaluation, differences persist about how and when they should be applied, by whom, and which operational procedures and adaptations to use. In addition, it is important to remember that the criteria used to assess spirituality-related activities usually are not the targeted results, nor is input a good measure of output.

Although Christians believe that evaluative criteria for spiritual wellness and maturity are provided in the Bible, they sometimes disagree with each other about which ones to apply to

specific situations and how to apply procedures that are equivalent to operational definitions. Christians face an added theological complication. The Bible teaches that all things work together for good among those who love God (Romans 8:28), so their logical conclusion is that whenever God allows events and circumstances that normally are interpreted as bad or evil, they should be redefined for use as beneficial means toward good ends, such as more effective servanthood or growth toward spiritual maturity. Mature Christians are thereby enabled to give thanks IN (but not necessarily FOR) everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

The success of spiritual interventions in any care giving agency typically is judged by both explicit and implicit criteria of the spiritual wellness or wholeness of clients – criteria that ought to be openly stated, whether they are used for administrative, therapeutic, or research purposes. Many are so culturally embedded that people take them for granted as if they are implanted in human nature, thus "something everybody knows." When the criteria are incorporated into laws, rules, regulations, measuring instruments, and clinical inventories, they sometimes result in roughshod trampling on the norms of minority subcultures or groups.

Significant differences of spiritual orientations and practices within and among Eastern, Western, and other religions merge with the diverse values and practices of their respective ethnic subcultures to create formidable problems of communication, caring services, symptom management, and other aspects of medical services (MacKinlay 2010). The requirements and restrictions imposed by legal, political, or administrative actions may either support, oppose, or modify religious and ideological efforts to overcome differences of opinion in a society.

Spiritual discernment therefore is necessary for well-balanced spiritual nurture and therapy, whatever its religious and cultural context. The outcomes related to spiritual health should never be evaluated by feelings alone, even though that deceptive subjective approach

seems to be the most prominent one used in popular culture and spirituality cults. (An illustrative physiological analogue comes from cancer victims. Some feel perfectly well during early stages of the subtle progress of that pernicious disease, but by the time they feel distress and get a medical checkup, their first-diagnosed cancer is so far advanced that a cure is no longer possible. Spiritual illness--an underdeveloped subject--can be similar.)

Whenever the immediate gratification of pleasurable feelings is the main goal of interventions, clients are apt to suffer an undeserved injustice. A similar outcome results from erroneous affirmations that imply, "You are OK just as you are, no matter what your spiritual commitment, because all spiritualities are equal." Accurately diagnosing the types and degrees of spiritual illness and health is one of the most difficult challenges facing therapists, researchers, chaplains, and other service providers, especially in pluralistic societies.

ETHICAL ISSUES

Temptations to violate personal freedom and erode human dignity often arise during research on spirituality. One example is the desire to use experimental and control groups to test the outcomes of spiritual interventions. A central feature of the liberty that is highly prized in democratic societies is allowing each person to make his or her own purpose-for-living commitments under the independent choice of a worldview that designates objectives around which the rest of that person's life can be organized. Categorically classifying individuals into a "spiritual" experimental group and a "non-spiritual" control group can significantly violate that autonomy of the human spirit by placements and expectations that clash with the consciences of some or many subjects.

Arbitrary assignments, no matter how random, seldom if ever produce the same results as

comparisons of research groups that were naturally created by their members' voluntary choices. Although ritualistic practices are easily imposed upon people who seek healing for physical, mental, or spiritual illness, the personal faith at the core of spirituality is not genuine if it consists of nothing more than a requirement for assent that is imposed for research purposes. Although experimentation makes good scientific sense, spirituality is neither a behavioral nor a material phenomenon that can be arbitrarily imposed on or withheld from people.

However, even when religious liberty is a protected freedom in a society, a person's liberty must be curtailed if its practice violates the civil rights of others. Thus, for example, a patient is granted the personal freedom in America to accept or reject medical treatment within the limits of public safety screening, but parents are not free to refuse life-saving medical treatment for their child on grounds of their own religion (Bottoms et al.1995).

The spiritual nature and needs of humanity fuel a huge marketplace of spiritual products, but they also contribute to various forms of exploitation and fraud. The producers and marketers of numerous spiritualities claim that their healing practices, potions, or gadgets generate miracles, increase longevity, or produce happiness, health, and wealth, but their allegations are seldom supported by any appropriate evidence other than the biased testimonies of carefully selected cases.

Eccentric sects make lavish promises. Many claim that purchasing their membership and products will produce not only health and wealth, but also enlightenment, ancient wisdom, spiritual guidance, unity with the Kosmos, entry to a spirit realm, discovery of spiritual laws of success, miracles of divine healing, or other pathways to economic, physical, mental, or spiritual well-being or other desires. Some are westernized adaptations of Hinduism, Buddhism, Native American faiths, or other religions. Among them are those that highlight seemingly mysterious

Bible phrases, using them to extend, publicize, or strengthen their own appeals.

Selected and sometimes distorted biblical data also are used by Christian "prosperity gospel," "name it and claim it," and "positive thinking" advocates who are on the commercial fringe of becoming manipulative health-happiness-and-wealth cults (see Ehrenreich 2009). Selling spirituality has become a big business that includes catering to individually created "pick-and-mix" faiths that compete with conventional religions (Carrette and King 2005).

Research has repeatedly confirmed the overwhelmingly positive relationships of spirituality to healing, health, and well-being, but deliberately using those findings to offer or impose spiritual influences as only a means for serving the goals of health, healing, or well-being can change the spiritual by-product into a dynamic guiding purpose. Such goal displacement violates both ethical and theological norms (Shuman and Meador, 2002).

Most ethical guidelines used in health service agencies seem simple and clear on the surface, but ethics committees repeatedly deal with complications of marginal and borderline cases, new treatments, disagreements, and disputes, many of which involve or impinge upon spiritual issues.

Cover-ups of tangible evidences of ethical violations may be even more prominent in the realm of spiritual issues than they are in those related to sex (Chaves and Garland 2009) or to deceitful scams and hoaxes associated with medical, economic, or political malfeasance because spiritual objectives are so easily "hidden under the carpet" of healthcare or other valid concerns.

To help resolve ethical issues related to spiritual therapy, at least three questions should be raised:

1) Is there solid evidence, well grounded tradition, or only selfishly biased opinions about the impact of a proposed change?

2) Can we discern the consequences – those that are direct and indirect, manifest and latent,

     functional and dysfunctional, deferred and long-range, not only immediately obvious --

     of each viable alternative for spiritual action that is under consideration?

3) Is it ethically fair to impose the religious or spiritual values of the majority upon everybody in

     an entire heterogeneous population? (In addition, as mentioned in connection with

     politics above, one can question whether a minority ought to try to force its values upon

     an entire society, as in the case of American conservatives who believe their views on

     abortion and homosexual marriage should be made the law of the land.)

In summary, the ethical issues in spirituality practice and research are so subtle and complex that they are difficult to study. The interiorized faith that is at or near the center of each person's spirituality ought to be protected in every society, not only in those that formally advocate religious liberty. In the USA it is supported by the "free exercise" provision of the First Amendment to the Constitution. It in turn harmonizes with the Christian teaching that a person's faith commitment is genuine only if it is based upon a personal response to God's love and grace through Jesus Christ, a choice that should be made independently even though it inevitably is influenced by prior conditioning and other inducements to push or pull one's spiritual orientation in one or more particular directions.

Either compelling people to engage in spiritual practices or prohibiting their participation in spirituality-related groups and activities can denigrate spirituality and violate religious liberty, whether done for research, therapy, or achieving political or ecclesiastical goals. Treating any spiritual means toward an end as its ultimate purpose is an immoral form of goal displacement that harms individuals and degrades a society.

THE KEY ISSUE

Basic to everything else related to spirituality is the way one answers the question, What is the essence of human nature? The model of humanity a researcher or scholar adopts has exceptionally significant implications for the methods used, interpretations made, conclusions reached, and applications recommended in regard to spirituality as well for understanding the purpose and value of human life, social structures, and morality (Smith 2010).

If human beings are only bodies with brains, we are so similar to other forms of life that we are best viewed as merely animals that evolved over millions of years to become arrogantly "higher" than other animals from which we differ only slightly. But do not most of us recognize that there truly is something uniquely different about humanity? Do we not believe that we ourselves have an identity that transcends our body and brain? All things considered, people still remain distinct persons after losing all four limbs, their appendix, tonsils, and other body parts. Even when the mind deteriorates from Alzheimer's or other degenerative diseases, something more than merely a biological organism remains.

Anthropological, archeological, and historical studies confirm the arguably universal presence of religious and pseudo- or quasi-religious beliefs, rituals, sacrificial systems, or other spirituality-based doctrines and practices among people worldwide. They support many intriguing teachings of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. Prominent among them is that God "set eternity in the hearts of men" (Ecclesiastes 3:11) and at death "the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).[5]

Circumstantial but strong evidence of a spiritual realm of reality is emerging from the physical sciences. Paleoanthropological studies of fossil hominid specimens and artifacts associated with them, allegedly extending over five million years, reveal solid evidence of

"soulish behaviors" (Stearley 2009). Quantum and nuclear physicists who study quarks, photons, neutrinos, and other minute particles suggest that there may be as many as ten to twenty dimensions or types of reality, not only the five to which the sciences have been limited. New specialties like astrobiology and astrophysics are establishing astounding linkages between the physical, biological, and social sciences, on the one hand, and religious studies, the Bible, and theology on the other (Zoeller-Greer 2000; Polkinghorne 2006, 2008). Their investigations are helping to liberate the human spirit from its imprisonment in an intellectually delimited three-dimensional universe of space, time, and matter.

A new specialty, the Biology of Spirituality, is emerging out of the ever-broadening range of empirical evidence from neuroscience, psychology, cognitive science, and related disciplines (Seybold 2010). Using recently developed technologies, neurologists and geneticists claim to have discovered scientifically observable evidence for spirituality-related phenomena. Among these are a God-spot in the human brain (Albright and Ashbrook 2001), a signature of intelligent design in the DNA of the human cell (Meyer 2009; Venema 2010), nonmaterialistic spiritual regions of the brain that are claimed to be a fundamental aspect of human nature (Beauregard and O'Leary 2007), a God-gene that is implicated in self-transcendence and spirituality (Hamer 2004), and a relational *imago dei* that is interwoven in the scientific studies of human nature (Jeeves and Brown 2009). Collins (2006), who directed the Human Genome Project and is currently Director of the National Institutes of Health, views the genome, the DNA, as the language in which God created life, one that also is a means for providing believers a small glimpse into the mind of God.

Those and similar scientific findings are still provisional. They are contested by scientists with incompatible worldviews. They need to be confirmed, modified, or rejected in future

research through as thorough testing as possible lest their conclusions replicate conceptual and

methodological errors similar to those of the widely accepted 19th century scientific research on

phrenology that subsequently was repudiated (Norman and Jeeves 2010). Nevertheless, the

recent research and its interpretations do seem to reflect and confirm ancient teachings of the

Judeo-Christian Bible. They support my conviction that the "something more" than merely a

biological organism that is the core of human nature is the human spirit.

That opinion is close to the conclusion of Italian sociologist Sturzo (1947) that humanity

is mystically submerged in "the supernatural":

> The supernatural is not … something juxtaposed to the natural, which individuals may
>
> accept or reject at will. In studying society in its complex wholeness, in the concrete, it is
>
> found to exist within the atmosphere of the supernatural, and to act and react to it
>
> according to the sociological laws which are at its natural basis. … Supernatural
>
> experiences take place in our natural being and the functioning of the two lives
>
> interweaves with a continuous reciprocal efficacy (pp. 20, 39).

Sturzo's perspective is consistent with the biblical statement that "God created man in his

own image ... male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). The nature of that *imago Dei*

has a long history of popular speculations and profound philosophical and theological studies.

Jesus explained it succinctly in his comment to a Samaritan woman, "God is spirit, and his

worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). His answer is confirmed by

additional Bible passages that differentiate the body from the soul (e.g., Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27;

23:42-43, 46; 1 Corinthians 15:35-57; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; Philippians 1:21-24). Despite the

numerous titles, attributes, and metaphors used to describe God, "he" is Spirit, transcending

gender with neither male nor female form (Spencer 2010). Theologically speaking, creation "in

God's image" as "a living soul" (Genesis 2:7) therefore means that the essence of all human beings (scoundrels and criminals as well as heroes, saints, and spiritual elders) is spirit.

Some "spiritualities" focus so strongly upon the spirit that they ignore the mind or the body, while others do the opposite. Sociological, psychological, medical, humanistic, and theological balance demands a holistic perspective that gives proper attention to all three. (For a sociological analysis see McGuire 2003.) Regardless of how one answers the question about the essence of human nature, physical, mental, and spiritual health are so interactive that the illnesses and wellness of each powerfully affects the others.

Most questions about the essential nature of humanity are conclusively resolved by the acknowledgment that all people are spirits that possess bodies and minds, but not by giving priority to either the body or the mind. *Spirit* and its overlapping concept of *soul* refer primarily to the whole person, a unitary or monistic wholeness that nevertheless can be analytically interpreted as including or consisting of body, mind, and spirit or soul.[6] Ward (2006) has shown that this is consistent with the beliefs and practices of not only Christianity but of all world faiths "whose primary concern is to relate [all] humans to a spiritual being, in a conscious way, for the sake of obtaining good and avoiding harm" (p.180). It holds true even though those faiths are obviously different from each other and have conceptions of supreme goodness that have taken diverse forms.

CONCLUSIONS

Spirituality is so central to the defining essence of human nature that everything people think, say, and do is positively or negatively related to it, even if they, their companions and colleagues, and a majority of people worldwide are unaware of its pervasiveness. The better we

understand it, the more we recognize how vast and comprehensive it is. Researching spirituality

therefore is a huge subject in a vast domain. It deserves explicit attention in most, if not all, of

the humanities and sciences. No one can fully comprehend all of its features and ramifications,

for they are closely related to the growing edges of the totality of human knowledge and

understanding.

The postulate that all humans are spiritual beings evokes special humility because it

precludes the pretension that anybody can step out of human nature to observe one's self or any

other humanity-related phenomenon with perfectly complete objectivity.

But the fact that nobody can fully grasp the entirety of spirituality is no good reason for

failing to scrape away at tiny portions of the paradoxically huge subject that fall within the

limited scope of one's finite understanding, abilities, opportunities, and methodologies. Doing so

with integrity defeats the scholarly and scientific hubris that assumes past experiences, historical

records, literary depictions, religious interpretations, philosophical studies, biographical

accounts, and "old" research related to spirituality are no longer relevant. It overcomes the

debunking of religious and cultural expressions other than one's own and instead treats all with

respect, even while noticing their shortcomings and flaws. It prohibits the reductionistic boasting

that one's findings constitute the finality of knowing everything about spirituality that is

important. It replaces the gloating pride of claiming one completely understands the subject with

a humility that emerges from the awareness that, far beyond the currently visible horizons of our

understanding, there lies more and more and still more.

Each focus of attention in spirituality research, as well as on its practical applications to

promote physiological, psychosomatic, religious, sociocultural, or other components of spiritual

wellness, is like a circle of concern. Every circle overlaps to some degree with all of the other

circles of research, study, and clinical applications. A major collective goal of spirituality research should be improving the linkages of the overlapping and interconnected studies.

Expenditures of time and effort to learn more about any specialized fragment of the vast domains of spirituality and its relationships to theology, health, and well-being necessitate a given researcher's neglect of in-depth attention to thousands of the other fragments. Fortunately, countless others are working on different splinters of the complex over-arching totality. All can benefit from openly sharing their definitional concepts, theories, hypotheses, methodologies, findings, and applications.

Investigating the similarities and differences of spirituality concepts and practices among diverse ideologies and religions, each with its own sects, denominations, ritualistic variations, schools of thought, and other internal divisions, continually challenges us to compare their ethical, philosophical, theological, practical, and other consequences. Doing that is an unending task because each new discovery expands the horizons of what we know and understand about spirituality, at the same time increasing our awareness of things we still do not fully know and details we cannot completely fathom. Because the increased knowledge extends the known territory and boundaries of spirituality, it paradoxically reduces the percentage of its recognized scope that is known to us. Research thus increases its mysteries.

No field of knowledge has an exclusive monopoly on spirituality research. Recognizing that fact calls for humility while we courageously engage in innovative specialized studies with cross-disciplinary cooperation that results in enlightened transdisciplinary fertilization of knowledge and thought.

All who openly engage in honest research to investigate aspects of spirituality in any population, discipline, or profession, whether from an orientation of skeptical agnosticism,

secularism, atheism, or commitment to a specific religion, can contribute to expanding collective knowledge and understanding of the human spirit and thus to improving the well-being of humanity.

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NOTES

[1]This is an expanded version of "Expanding Horizons for Spirituality Research and Its Applications," the Berton H. Kaplan Lecture at the Third Annual Meeting of The Society

for Spirituality, Theology and Health at Duke University, June 18, 2010. I am grateful for

suggestions given in a Theological Confab Discussion Group, for critiques of anonymous

reviewers who stimulated my improvements of the text, for John Kassel's help with

computer software problems, and for editorial suggestions by Marlys S. Taege, my

widely published wife.

[2]Although the 140 mostly recent references are extensive, they acknowledge only a few of the

thousands that have stimulated my thinking. Their main purpose is to provide examples

of both prominent and elusive resources that can help readers initiate or extend their own

investigations of spirituality and its countless subtopics.

[3]One example of empirical efforts to study universal spirituality is the Spiritual Transcendence

Scale (Piedmont 2007). It interprets spirituality as an intrinsic source of motivation that

impels individuals to create a sense of personal meaning for their lives.

[4]For example, the 21-page double-column index in Dawood's (1990) translation of the Qur'an

does not list "Spirituality" and has only nine entries under "Spirit."

[5]I will not be surprised if future archeological research discovers evidence that all major religions

can be traced back to circumstances at an "Eden" or "Tower of Babel." That finding

would confirm my hypothesis that all faiths have a common origin, but they have

developed in different directions under the diversities of human experience associated

with dissimilar geographic and cultural settings, ritualistic modifications, and interpretive

philosophies, continually adapting through countless modifications during both primeval

and historical eras of time.

[6] Theological discussions related to this are found in Ward 1992; Murphy 2006; Green 2008, and

Boyd and Eddy 2009, pp. 97-110. The Bible does not explicitly make sharp and clear

distinctions about the nature of the human body, mind, soul, and spirit nor their interrelationships. Instead those concepts are casually presented as integral aspects of or perspectives on the whole person. However, it often emphasizes the importance of the directions in which persons choose to orient their mind and will or "heart." Additional stimulating discussions about definitions of human nature are in Jeeves 2004; Miller and Delaney 2005, and Moreland and Rae, 2000.