

ASERVIC WHITE PAPER

A White Paper of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling

The concept of spirituality is integral to the purpose and activity of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC). Many ASERVIC members hold an appreciation for the spiritual nature of human beings and awareness of the ramifications of spirituality for human development, personal identity, and community. However, the term *spirituality* is often vaguely defined or confused with the idea of religion or a particular sectarian belief system, leading to misunderstanding about the nature and purpose of ASERVIC. This paper is an effort to clarify the meaning of the term *spirituality* in order to represent ASERVIC accurately to its members and interested others.

It is difficult to perfectly define the numinous concept of spirituality because of the limited capacity of language. Therefore, a definition or description of spirituality is only a starting point that cannot fully represent the entire concept. Any definition or description must be accompanied by qualifications and the following reflections.

Spirit may be defined as the animating life force, represented by such images as breath, wind, vigor, and courage. Spirituality is the drawing out and infusion of spirit in one's life. It is experienced as an active and passive process.

Spirituality is also defined as a capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons. This spiritual tendency moves the individual toward knowledge, love, meaning, peace, hope, transcendence, connectedness, compassion, wellness, and wholeness. Spirituality includes one's capacity for creativity, growth, and the development of a value system. Spirituality encompasses a variety of phenomena, including experiences, beliefs, and practices. Spirituality is approached from a variety of perspectives, including psychospiritual, religious, and transpersonal. While spirituality is usually expressed through culture, it both precedes and transcends culture. (1)

The term "spirituality" is rooted in the Latin word *spiritus*, which means "breath of life" (Elkins, et al., 1988). Various authors have given convergent definitions of the concept. Kelly (1995) describes it as "a personal affirmation of a transcendent connectedness in the universe" (p.4). Shafranske and Gorsuch (1984) call it "the courage to look within and to trust. What is seen and trusted appears to be a deep sense of belonging, of wholeness, of connectedness, and of openness to the infinite" (p.233). Elkins, et al. (1988) describe spirituality as "a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate" (p.10). These

definitions have in common a view of human nature, which recognizes the longing for a reality beyond the physically finite and the search for a deep and abiding meaning to life.

The concepts of meaning, transcendence, and connectedness are imbedded in the nature of human spirituality. Spirituality leads one to search for and discover *meaning* in life, a meaning that goes beyond a merely material experience, however successful (May, 1982). This is a deeply personal search, which can bring a person to inner peace even in the presence of adverse circumstances. *Transcendence* is a personality characteristic which “emphasizes a personal search for connection with a larger sacredness” (Piedmont, 1999, p.6). This transcendent nature of human spirituality “refers to the capacity of individuals to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and place to view life from a larger, more objective perspective” (Piedmont, 1999, p.6). One’s spirituality also provides a sense of *connection* to life, to nature, and to others which goes beyond the physical limits of one’s own biological mortality. In our spirituality we are drawn to see life as bigger than ourselves, perhaps mystical, and certainly as more important and meaningful than our own individual existence.

Spirituality is not the same thing as religion. While religion may be one way in which persons express or experience their spirituality, it is not the same as spirituality itself. Religion can be thought of as the organization of belief which is common to a culture or subculture, “the codified, institutionalized, and ritualized expressions of peoples’ communal connections to the Ultimate” (Kelly, 1995, p.5). Religion is “an integrated system of belief, lifestyle, ritual activities, and institutions by which individuals give meaning to (or find meaning in) their lives by orienting them to what is taken to be sacred, holy, or the highest value” (Corbett, 1990, p.2). Religions also have in common their authority over the participant’s life, ritual forms of expression, explanations about the origins and meaning of life, and tradition (Smith, 1994). Spirituality and religious practice are neither exclusive of one another nor do they automatically reside simultaneously in an individual.

ASERVIC does not identify with or promote any particular religious belief system. However, ASERVIC does recognize that the majority of persons in America profess some form of religious belief, even if they are not active participants in a particular religion. Many others are deeply rooted in their religious belief system and its related community. Their beliefs have a profound impact on their world view, relationships, self-concept, and problem solving approaches. In addition, changes in one’s beliefs over a lifetime follow a developmental pattern, so that older persons experience their religion much differently than do younger persons. These changing perceptions and beliefs, like many other developmental changes, can profoundly affect the well being of clients over time.

ASERVIC believes that counselors should be aware of the religious belief systems of their clients and be able to include that awareness as part of an effective counseling practice. While ASERVIC does not champion any religious system, the organization does recognize the important psychological impact of religious belief and its relevance to clients’ personal concerns. Finally, whether or not it is expressed through religious belief and activity, spirituality brings a sense of connectedness to the Ultimate, to life, to nature, and to other persons which transcends religious belief.

(1) Paragraphs 2-4 are taken from the description of spirituality developed by the Summit on Spirituality.

References

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