HELPING ADDICTS MOVE BEYOND THE SPIRITUAL WADING POOL: A NEW APPROACH TO RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE HEALING OF ADDICTIONS

LINDA MERCADANTE, Ph.D.
Straker Chair of Theology
The Methodist Theological School in Ohio

Spirituality and Religion: How Are They Connected?

For a very long time, the fields of psychology and medicine -- places where addiction is often discovered and treated -- virtually ignored both spirituality and religion. In fact, as one researcher discovered: “the word spirituality did not even appear in Medline until the 1980s” (Mills, 2002, p.1). Fortunately this is changing, for in just the last decade or so, spirituality and even religion have become hot topics in both the medical and psychological fields.

As Paul Mills (2002) says in the Annals of Behavioral Medicine:

Attention to topics of spirituality, religiousness, and health has increased substantially in medical and graduate school curricula, clinical practice and research. . . Of the many interesting aspects of this phenomenon, perhaps the most remarkable is the observation that medical science, the field of inquiry that initially separated mind from body. . . now finds it compelling and perhaps even necessary to reexamine the relationship among spirit, mind, and body. (p.1)

In fact, he says, “In recent years, every major medical, psychiatric, and behavioral medicine journal has published on the topic” (of religion and health or spirituality and health) (pp.1-2). This is not just in journals, but also in curriculum. For as another researcher reports, in The New England Journal of Medicine: “Nearly 30 U.S. medical schools now offer courses on religion, spirituality and health” (Sloan, et. al., 2000, p. 1913). While this is an exciting development, a problem exists. For these fields are still trying to hold spirituality and religion apart from each other, treating them as two distinct things that can be pulled apart and examined. From this seemingly “safe” perspective, spirituality seems nicely generic and individual, while religion seems too particular and collective. Spirituality seems non-dogmatic and open-ended, while religion seems judgmental and prescriptive. Shortly, I will discuss why I see these divisions as rather arbitrary and artificial. Nevertheless, it is quite understandable why people try to separate religion from spirituality.

First, and most obvious, religion is a very diverse thing. It is not unilateral in either beliefs or practices. Even people who worship together may understand their faith very differently. The second most obvious factor is that religion can function along a wide continuum, ranging from the highly functional role, providing solid values and healthy behavioral norms, to the low point of being dangerously dysfunctional, leading to or playing into neuroses and delusions. While these issues make religion a difficult subject to deal with, there is one very important thing that is constant about religion. Throughout human history, religion has existed to provide
a framework of meaning for people, making sense of life and death. In fact, across time and culture religion has been the most constant source of meaning for humanity. To say that because religion can be used harmfully, it should be avoided -- is like saying that we should not eat food because some of it is bad for us.

Religion also presents practical problems, however, for counselors, therapists and medical personnel. First, there are ethical concerns -- it is not right to impose your own value system or religious perspective on a client. Second, there are issues of diversity, for clients will come to you from many different backgrounds and rather than do them a disservice, it seems safer to stay with some kind of generic experience that all can relate to. Third and most important, there are issues of expertise. It is hard enough to master even one religious perspective, much less to claim you understand all of them, or even many of them. Even a trained minister feels daunted by trying to understand the religious and value system that each congregant brings with him or her.

When people try to separate spirituality and religion, though, not only is it artificial, but it leads to stereotypes. Many articles go through considerable effort in order to define religion and spirituality as separate and distinct from each other. A by-product of this effort, is that writers are often are forced to make false, or at least arbitrary dichotomies. David Moberg (2002), in the Journal of Adult Development, finds 3 types of separation. He says there are: three polarizations that differentiate religiousness from spirituality (organizational religion vs. functional spirituality, and negative religiousness vs. positive spirituality). (pp.47-48)

The last of these false dichotomies is the most problematic and probably the most common in the public imagination. This popular stereotype says that religion is ritualized, dogmatic and dead, while spirituality is personal, pure and positive. These polarizations are quick and dirty, cut and dried, simple and simplistic. They do not take into account many things, though.

First, both religion and spirituality are so intertwined with each other that hardly anyone experiences them completely apart. Second, both aspects are multifaceted and thus require an integrated perspective to do them justice. Third, if all of life is sacred, we cannot find much practical difference between the two concepts in real life terms. If I were forced to consider religion and spirituality separately, I would have to say that spirituality is like the gas, with religion being the vehicle. You can't drive without both.

An even better analogy would be to say that religion is like language. Spirituality may be the meaning, but you cannot separate them. For when we learn our native language growing up, we also learn how to think, how to feel, and how to understand reality from inside that linguistic framework. Anyone who has studied a foreign language, especially a very different one from their own, will realize that one also gains a whole new perspective on reality.

You cannot, however, cleanly pull spirituality and religion apart. In the end, what we call spirituality also comes to us in the vehicle
of some religious framework, whether that religious framework is traditional or non-traditional. In the end, separating religion and spirituality trivializes and minimizes religion and it makes spirituality overly generic and amorphous. It is not just scholars in the field of religion who think this. Recent studies and polls are showing that it is very difficult, in real life terms, to break apart these two things. There is increasing evidence that Americans are both spiritual and religious. Here is some data compiled by researchers from various surveys (Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003; Miller & Thoresen, 2003):

- Belief in God is held by some 96% of the American public
- Prayer is common, with 9 out of 10 people asserting that they pray, most of them (67%–75%) on a daily basis
- Many respondents claim that faith is a central guiding force in their lives
- Interest in spirituality is high and growing: In 1994 58% of respondents expressed interest in spirituality. By 1998 there was nearly a 25% increase, as 82% expressed interest
- Religion is claimed as “very important” in the lives of 67% of people surveyed
- Over two thirds (69%) recently reported that they were members of a church or synagogue
- 42% attend services regularly.

Religion is Important and it is Good for Your Health

It is a good thing that spirituality and religion are so intertwined in real life, because recent studies are showing that the practice of religion brings amazing health benefits. Even if we bracket ideas of salvation and union with God (which are closer to the heart of religion then any of it’s more tangible, this-worldly, benefits) even then, even from the purely emotional and physical levels, being religious is good for you.

Of course, it helps if you believe that religion can help you heal from physical problems. Many people do. In a recent poll of 1000 adults, 79% “believed spiritual faith can help people recover from disease” (Miller & Thoresen, 2003, p.664). But it’s not just the power of positive thinking. The American Psychologist reported the findings of seven studies, each of which discovered that church attendees had between 25-30% reduction in risk of mortality during the studied period. That was just for showing up. They speculate that if these people actually practiced what they heard during the rest of their week, the figures would go higher still (Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003).

Addicts and Religion

What about addicts? Not surprisingly, a very high percentage of addicts are alienated from religion, and often from any form of personal spirituality as well. William Miller (2007) says:

As in other health fields, the addiction literature generally indicates that spiritual/religious involvement is a protective factor against the development of problems. There is also evidence that persons currently suffering from alcohol and other drug problems tend to show particularly low levels of spiritual/religious engagement and the relative lack of a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. The process of recovery is often associated with
corresponding improvement on spiritual measures….Certainly there are those, including the vast community of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), who would argue that spiritual changes are a part and prerequisite of enduring recovery from addictions. The addictions field is, in fact, one of the few health fields where enthusiasm for spiritual factors in recovery has never been lost (pp. 37-8).

That is good, but not good enough. Even persons with many years of sobriety, even people in deep recovery, are still very likely to insist they are “spiritual but not religious.” Counselors sometimes encourage them in this stance and sometimes recovery groups do as well. While it is a remarkable achievement to move addicts towards a spiritual stance, it is not enough to promote deep spiritual recovery. If addiction is, in the end, a spiritual as well as a physical disease, spiritual recovery is desperately needed even once the physical addiction is under control.

So then, to summarize: we cannot artificially separate spirituality and religion. Doing this does a disservice to both; forcing us into a non-integrative, reductionist and artificial stance. Being overtly religious is good for you, both protective and healing. The practice of religion has benefits which can be observed and even measured, and while the source of these benefits is more intangible, the results are not. Recovering people should not be denied these benefits.

Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, insisted that AA is only a “spiritual kindergarten.” If this is so, how can we encourage people to stay in kindergarten?

Should we not help them graduate to first grade and beyond? Should we not work to get them involved in a recognized, legitimate and real religious tradition? I contend that we should and we must. If we do not, we are denying them the very real benefits of active religiousness. One gift of recovery, especially the 12 Step version, first promoted by AA, is that it helps people get their feet wet, spiritually. It eases them into the wading pool. Many, though, remain afraid indefinitely of getting their faces wet and truly learning to swim. What can we do to encourage them to go deeper, little by little, until they are true spiritual swimmers?

A Suggested Schema – A Circle of Spiritual Guidance

My contribution as a theologian is to propose a schema that may help counselors introduce people to spirituality in a way that does not bracket out religion. Instead, it can serve as the channel that inevitably, if it is practiced fully, leads there. This schema can help people wade, then go to chest height, and then finally put their faces in and swim. I call this a “circle of spiritual guidance,” for it is intended to lay the groundwork for religious involvement of some sort. The ultimate goal is to help move recovering persons to become engaged with a responsible, stable and compassionate community of faith. This would include active involvement in larger benevolent causes, ongoing mutual commitment, and a positive foundation for life-meaning that will last.

The schema is designed to do four things:

1. Allow people to enter at any place they can
2. Take into account diversity of background and tradition
3. Not minimize or trivialize religion
4. Recognize that while not everyone has the expertise to be a religious and spiritual mentor, everyone can make a contribution to spiritual healing.

Although I can assert that this schema connects well with Christian theology, I do not want to claim it connects seamlessly with other religious traditions. I do think, though, that it has potential here as well. For what is it about religion that keeps people healthy? There are many factors, some tangible -- like enlarging your circle of friends -- and some intangible. The most important intangibles, researchers have said, is having meaning and purpose in your life and the values that promote this. So we may ask: How do people find meaning in life? What values keep people sober? I offer four active values that will help each person discover the meaning of his or her own life and connect with others. Hopefully this will lead them on into a recognized responsible and stable religious community. These four active values are:

1. Risk for Good
2. Hope Actively
3. Accept Accountability
4. Seek Higher Ground

1. Risk for Good
Take the risk that good will prevail. Contribute your effort to make it happen. The highest good is One who insures good will prevail. Risk that there is this One.

2. Hope Actively
Hope even against hope, but hope actively. Your hope must help bring about what you hope for, it must be mediatorial. Your hope rests on the belief that there is Someone who will make it come out right in the end. But your help is needed.

3. Accept Accountability
Choose, will and/or accept your connection to others. Recognize how your life affects others. Becoming accountable is a simple recognition of this fact, but you have to live it.

4. Seek Higher Ground
Do not stay in the flood plain. Keep moving toward higher ground. Your goals are not high enough. Keep pushing yourself beyond your present goal, to something even better. Ultimately the goal will be so large that you will need lots of help, both human and divine.

These are not steps. They are a circle. You can enter anywhere. If you risk for good, you are instinctively hoping there is a guarantor of your actions, that it will not be a waste or fruitless. If you accept your connection to others, your must have higher goals than just your own self-interest. If you search for higher ground, you are naturally involving more people. To do this, you must take the risk that good will win in the end, that this is worth it. If you see your connectedness, you can also see that you can pull each other down. So you need to hope that good will prevail and actively use your efforts to contribute to that. Your example and encouragement will catch up other people in this quest and action.

Risking for good is ultimately counting on the fact that there is a good God or benevolent foundation for all reality. Hoping actively is lending your hand to making good prevail. This is eschatological behaviour. Accepting your connection to others and living it out is
realizing that we are all community to one another, under God’s gaze and all loved by God. This can become your entry to a church, synagogue, temple or mosque. If you search ever higher, you will arrive at God’s goals, at an acceptance of them and a desire to help out in any way you can, in ways you are best suited to help. So you are also accountable to yourself because you must know what you have and can contribute. There is no point in promising what you cannot deliver. Others are counting on you, so knowing yourself is part of accountability.

To summarize again: It is artificial and counterproductive to separate religion and spirituality. Religion is good for you. Even on the merely physical and emotional levels, it is both protective and healing. So we should help all people, perhaps most especially recovering persons, to actively connect with a religious tradition. On that point, there is a crucial note. You will never find the perfect place of worship. While some are better than others, some are more functional and healthy and some less, communities of worship are like families – they all have their issues, their group dynamics, their strengths and weaknesses. Although you cannot choose your family, you can choose your place of worship. Do not wait until you can find the perfect one, though, because it does not exist. Seek a place where most of your needs can be met by the community.

How do we help people, in particular addicts, move in that direction? Especially when addicted persons are often not inclined towards spirituality? I believe we need to start using something like my proposed “circle of spiritual guidance,” to encourage spirituality without discouraging religious involvement. We can no longer encourage people to say they are spiritual but not religious. That is a start, but it is not going to be enough. Instead of keeping people in the spiritual wading pool, we must help them learn to swim in the deep water of God’s grace.

REFERENCES


