

Belief in God, the Divine, Higher Power, or Ultimate Reality

Belief in God, the Divine, a Higher Power, or Ultimate Reality is a central characteristic of religion (Boyer, 2001). Yet people worldwide from all of the world's religions, have a myriad of ways in which they represent the nature, character, attributes, and or manifestations of the Divine (Sharp & Johnson, 2020). There is an increased academic interest in spirituality due to the broader public interest in the concepts of God, the Divine, Higher Power, or Ultimate Reality. Individuals are increasingly identifying as being spiritual over being religious. Spirituality has also been framed as a psychological "attitude," an individual experience, a search process, and a meaning-making system (Santos & Michaels, 2020). There is growing appreciation in clinical psychology and medicine that spirituality is a central concern for many people, leading to new recommendations for how clinicians can integrate spirituality into holistic care. Spiritual events such as spiritual emergency SE(y) may emerge as we globally tap into spiritual matters. Accordingly, spirituality means many different things to people.

In terms of closeness to God or the Divine, Jaworski (2017) has conceptualized spirituality which focuses on the self as anthropocentric spirituality, "placing oneself in the center of life" (p. 143), and "meeting the needs for self-fulfillment and spiritual development ... without reference to God" (p. 144).

Existential Meaningfulness and Ultimate Concern

Several writers have conceptualized existential meaningfulness as central to all four faith concepts. Existential meaningfulness refers to a human desire for a sense of purpose and direction, a feeling that what they are doing has some ultimate purpose, a view of their daily endeavors in the context of a bigger picture, transcendence; these are the demands placed upon their meaning systems. (Park, 2013, p. 357)

Generally speaking, spirituality involves meaning, life purpose, connectedness with others, nature, or beauty, concern for or commitment to something beyond oneself, a feeling of wholeness, beliefs, ethics, values, principles, love, joy, peace, hope, fulfillment, and or a personal relationship with a higher power or transcendent reality (Harris et al., 2018).

Harris et al. (2018) conducted a content analysis of 30 years' worth of literature in the psychology of religion to identify key prototypes used by scholars to define religiousness, spirituality, faith, and sacredness. Although these terms were often poorly defined, with overlapping terminology, from a prototype approach, prototype phenomena the elements judged to be the best examples of a category:

From a prototype approach, spirituality involves 20 discernible characteristics: (1) an internal emphasis, (2) a belief system, (3) a relationship, (4) an ultimate concern, (5) meaningfulness, (6) self-enhancement, (7) self-transcendence, (8) monism, (9) connectedness to self/others/the environment/ultimate concern, (10) personal experience, (11) a journey, (12) essence, (13) practices, (14) religiousness, (15) faith, (16) multidimensionality, (17) the non-worldly, (18) the spirit, (19) compassion, and (20) the nonrational. (p. 14) Harris et al.'s (2018) definition are integrative because it captures the breadth of concepts scholars associate with spirituality and reflects how

prototypes are multidimensional, with various key attributes that comprise the core concept. Proposing that spirituality is a search for or relationship with the sacred; religiousness is ritual, institutional, or codified spirituality which is culturally sanctioned; faith is a synonym for spirituality and or religiousness; and the sacred is manifestations of the divine, existential meaningfulness, or an ultimate concern as perceived by an individual and all of these constructs are placed under the term *faith concepts*.

Understanding our relationship to the Divine may be a focus of either primarily on understanding God (what we shall refer to as “theo-focused” spirituality) or, in contrast, on gaining a better understanding of the self (what we shall refer to as “ego-focused” spirituality)(Sharp & Johnson, 2020). Theo-focused as primarily focused on God and ego-focused as primarily focused on the self. A theo-focused orientation emphasizes a desire to understand the nature, attributes, and purposes of God and improve one’s relationship with the Divine. Philosophers, religious specialists, and laypersons alike, from many religious traditions, have dedicated their lives to understanding God. For instance, devotees have created lists of attributes or names to help understand God’s character and provide believers with different ways of interacting with God (e.g., St. John of Damascus’ 18 attributes, the 99 names of Allah). Others have focused on writing songs and poems in devotion to God (e.g., the Bhakti movement of Hinduism). A primary feature of theo-focused spirituality may be engaging in the practices of worship, scripture reading, rituals, festivals, and prayer directed toward God.

Ego-focused Spirituality. Whereas theo-focused spirituality is probably a common spiritual orientation in monotheistic religions, many view their relationship with God or the Divine as primarily illuminating something about themselves. For example, individuals in Abrahamic religious traditions may take an ego-focused, relatively individualistic approach to spirituality, with a focus on self-improvement; unity with nature (e.g., Gaia) or other humans and or conceptualizing a “higher self” or impersonal force rather than God as a personal being (Sharp & Johnson, 2020). Another example of ego-focused spirituality is an Asian or South Asian religious tradition that may focus more on their duties as a householder (Flood, 1996), practicing asceticism (self-discipline), or concerns about karmic forces. In this article, we have chosen the term “ego-focused” rather than ego-centric to signal that self-focused spirituality may entail self-denial and or union with God or an Ultimate Reality rather than mere self-interest. Indeed, among Hindus, Buddhists, and those in related traditions, there may be an emphasis on self-denial, emotional and worldly detachment, and understanding the self as an illusion or part of a greater cosmic whole where the goal is to attain escape from the mundane.

Saint Teresa of Avila’s Interior Castle is an ego-focused mystical account of a soul’s journey, through the metaphor of a castle. While the ultimate purpose of this journey is union with God, the emphasis is placed on the self, one must develop self-knowledge, moving through the seven “mansions” of the interior castle before one is ready to become a “Bride of Christ.” In a similar vein, the warrior Arjuna wrestles with his own emotions and duties to his countrymen in the Bhagavad Gita before coming to realize the majesty and divinity of his Lord Krishna. Thus, we argue that “union” or “connection” with the Divine can be an aspect of ego-focused spirituality as well (Sharp & Johnson, 2020).

Conclusion

For many people, science, religion and spirituality may appear to be at odds with each other. This is no longer important and perhaps never was when people are talking meaningfully about pain, life, and death. Martin Seligman, as he forged the new area of positive psychology 15 years ago, often told the story of the man who, having dropped his glasses at night near a tree, was asked why he searched several feet away near the lamp post. The man responded, “The light is brighter here,” metaphorically showing the affinity of scientists to gravitate toward an area that already has the language, method, and paradigm laid out to offer illumination (Miller, 2010, p. 35). Shall we look under the tree using the natural illumination of the moon and its reflection in the glass? At this level of consciousness, an individual’s experience is at a maximal level of awareness. Such awareness includes self-transcendence and a connection to a greater oneness or wholeness beyond the self. This maximal level of consciousness is a psychospiritual space which many clinicians have access to when supporting clients (Miller, 2010).

Those who survive stressful life events such as spiritual emergency SE(y) may need to explain their experiences in spiritual terms that are centrally positioned in a broader framework than is currently available (Bray, 2010). Vieten et al. (2013) & Herrick (2008) support the idea that determining how and when to include S/R/T interventions into a treatment plan requires proficiency, rather than basic competency. Young (2004) further suggests providing early interventions that provide ‘crisis strategies’ to help navigate and integrate SE experiences is of utmost importance. He further suggests, clinicians have an appropriate cultural awareness by attributing what is appropriate in one culture may not be appropriate in another (Ataria, 2016; Castillo, 2003; Cohen & Johnson, 2017; Dein, 2017; Hodge, 2010; Hook et al., 2013; MacDonald, 2015; Shiah et al., 2013; Telfener, 2017). “Healing is hermetic and happens not through rationality, cause and effect explanations; it occurs often in an inexplicable way, far away from reason; nearer to the spiritual domain than to the causal one” (Telfener, 2017, p. 165).

In the words of Tarnas (2001) “what we need are ways of knowing that integrate the imagination, imaginal and archetypal insight, the intuition, the aesthetic sensibility, the revelatory or epiphanic capacity, the capacity for kinesthetic knowing, the capacity for empathic understanding, the capacity to open the other, to listen” (p.19). “Let’s try an experiment. Imagine you are a universe, a deep, beautiful, ensouled universe, and that you are being approached by two different epistemologies, two suitors who see to know you. Would you open your deepest secrets to the suitor, that is, the methodology, the epistemology who would approach you as though you were unconscious, utterly lacking in intelligence or purpose, and inferior in being to him; who related to you as though you were ultimately there for his exploitation, his self-enhancement; and his motivation for knowing was driven essentially by a desire for prediction and control for his own self-betterment? Or would you open your deepest secrets to that suitor, that epistemology, that methodology who viewed you as being at least intelligent and powerful and full of mystery and soul as he is, and who sought to know you by uniting with you to create something new?” (p.20).

We came from a place called spirit into the body to have experience, to feel, to taste, to fall in love and to give the spirit a sense of what all is about. Lipton (2005, Ted Conference with Ruppert Shaldrake)

References

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