

APA Division 36 Newsletter

Society for the Psychology of Religion
and Spirituality

Fall 2025

President's Column

by Dr. David Rosmarin

Charting the Future of the Psychology of Religion & Spirituality



“We now have ten active committees and more than thirty-five volunteers, alongside a cohesive Executive Board - an unprecedented surge of energy and engagement. Together, we’re shaping a global movement...”

Division 36 stands at an inflection point. For too long, our society has remained a small circle - an echo chamber of devoted but limited voices. Our work has lacked the pluralism that truly represents our society, as well as the diversity of non-religious traditions. It’s time to look forward, not back, and bring the psychology of religion and spirituality into the mainstream of psychological science and clinical practice.

Spirituality and religion are humanity’s oldest tools for coping with suffering and promoting growth. Today, clinicians across the world are eager to learn how to integrate these dimensions into their work. I’ve personally trained thousands

of professionals on four continents - others in our division have reached even more. The hunger for this knowledge is real, and Division 36 is poised to meet it.

We now have ten active committees and more than thirty-five volunteers, alongside a cohesive Executive Board - an unprecedented surge of energy and engagement. Together, we’re shaping a global movement. Stay tuned for the upcoming Global Summit on Spirituality and Mental Health, in partnership with the World Psychiatric Association and Harvard Medical School.

Exciting times are ahead. Let’s do this, together!

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Perspectives

by Dr. Anthony Ahrens

On a Collaboration of Psychology & Theology



“We study that which is mysterious to us, and so often we do not recognize the extent of the mystery, focusing on one small concrete part of it, instead...”

Anthony Ahrens, Ph.D., is a Professor of Psychology at American University with interests in contemplative practices (especially from traditions other than Buddhism), virtue, desecration, and moral psychology. The following reflects on Dr. Ahrens’s experience collaborating with theologian David Cloutier to examine virtue and well-being.

In 2015 I stumbled into a research collaboration with a theologian, David Cloutier, and it has been a great gift. I have been asked to reflect on this experience of interdisciplinary research.

There is a Far Side cartoon in which a Martian holds a set of golf clubs and explains to another Martian: “We are not sure what these are for, but for now we are calling them ‘profanity sticks.’” The Martian does not understand the game of golf, but only observes the large amount of swearing that is involved and focuses on that. To the Martian, golf clubs exist primarily to evoke expletives.

As I have begun studying the psychology of religion, I have often found myself identifying with that Martian. We study that which is mysterious to us, and so often we do not recognize the extent of the mystery, focusing on one small concrete part of it, instead. The Martian tried to

study golf alone, but would have been better off talking to someone who was expert at golf. As a psychologist, a theologian can be that expert who gives me insight, and, in my own way I can be the expert for theologians, who are, in their own way, also Martians. Below, I offer three reflections on the collaboration that draw out the ideas I have touched on in this paragraph.

1) Engaging with theologians can give us psychologists new ideas for research topics.

As psychologists, perhaps even psychologists who practice a religion (I am Catholic), we are so often unaware of the ways in which those working within religious systems understand what they are doing. I had never heard of virtue theory, which focuses on becoming people who do the right thing for the right reasons, until David and I reflected on our respective interests in well-being, the topic of an interdisciplinary grant competition that catalyzed our collaboration. And yet, unknown to me, virtue has been a topic of great importance for those considering Catholic moral theology. How did learning about virtue affect my research activities? My well-being work had previously focused on subjective experience, such as the emotion of gratitude. Working with David has led me to think of well-being in terms of how we are living our lives rather than the emotions that flow from the way we are living.

2) Investing time in deep discussion with theologians will improve the quality of the shared work.

In doing interdisciplinary work, it is tempting to divide the labor, sticking to the part at which we are most expert. I might have written the sections on social cognitive theory and left David to write about virtue, with little conversation between us. Instead, David and I spent most of two years exchanging papers and meeting regularly to digest them. He taught me about virtue theory. I taught David about social cognitive theory, which focuses on humans as agents who are in dynamic interaction with their environment—a psychology that focuses on intrapersonal processes rather than on average behavioral regularities. By the end, we each could write a reasonable version of the parts of the paper that focused on the other's expertise. That fluency in the other's language and stories helped us both to a more nuanced understanding than we would have otherwise held. For instance, I had long been intrigued by various psychological measures of "eudaimonic well-being." Only after learning deeply from David was I able to recognize the shortcomings of most such measurement. I had not understood well enough what ethicists meant by eudaimonic well-being. I needed to come to know their thoughts more deeply.

3) There is an audience among theologians for thoughtful work from psychologists.

At parties, it is tempting to hang out with those we already know. But some of the best connections happen when we spend time with strangers. I have attended three conferences now at which I have been in the minority as a psychologist. In each I have found philosophers and/or theologians who have been eager to talk. They often have only limited time to understand what we psychologists do, and so their understanding of what we do can be two-dimensional. I suspect that having taken the time to learn their language, our conversations can be deeper, more interesting, than they would have been without that time.

The late psychologist Henry Gleitman once wrote "All the science of psychology gives us is small islands of coherence in a vast sea of chaos." In growing and

exploring the islands, working with people who have some understanding of that vast sea that is unknown to us can benefit all. That seems especially so for those of us trying to understand humans' relation to the transcendent.

Early Career Profile

by Dr. Suza Scalora & Dr. Micheline Anderson

Suza Scalora: Spirituality, Mental Health, and Human Flourishing



“My work is unified by a central aim: to integrate rigorous psychological science with the transformative dimensions of spirituality to advance mental health and human flourishing.”

Suza Scalora, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology at Weill Cornell Medicine and an Assistant Attending Psychologist at New York Presbyterian Hospital. She completed her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at Teacher’s College Columbia under Dr. Lisa Miller. The following is a profile on Dr. Scalora organized by Micheline Anderson, Ph.D.

Path into the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality

My interest in the intersection of psychology, religion, and spirituality emerged from observing the profound influence that meaning, purpose, and a bi-directional relationship with the transcendent have on mental health and well-being. During my clinical training, I recognized that many clients sought not only relief from symptoms but also deeper understanding, coherence, and a sense of the sacred in their lives. This recognition led me to pursue integrative, evidence-based approaches that bridge spirituality-informed treatment and empirical research. Over time, this focus has guided my research, teaching, and clinical work, emphasizing the development and evaluation of spiritually-informed cognitive-behavioral interventions. My ongoing professional work is dedicated to advancing evidence-based models that honor the whole person, spirit, mind, and body, in the promotion of psychological well-being.

Current Work

My current work focuses on the integration of spirituality into evidence-based mental health care through research, clinical innovation, and training. I lead studies examining how spiritually-informed cognitive-behavioral interventions can support meaning-making, resilience, and psychological well-being. This includes the development and evaluation of individual-and-group-based interventions that help explore questions of purpose, identity, and connection to something greater than themselves within a structured therapeutic framework. Clinically, I aim to create spaces where individuals can engage the psychological and spiritual dimensions of their experience as interrelated pathways toward healing and growth. Across research, teaching, and clinical practice, my work seeks to advance models of care that bridge rigorous intervention science with the transformative dimensions of spirituality to promote mental health and human flourishing.

Integrating Science and Spirit

Navigating the balance between empirical research and the subjective dimension of spirituality requires both methodological rigor and epistemological humility. I view science and spirituality as complementary ways of knowing, each offering distinct but mutually enriching insights into the human condition. Empirical methods allow us to test and refine interventions that foster well-

Integrating Science and Spirit Navigating

The balance between empirical research and the subjective dimension of spirituality requires both methodological rigor and epistemological humility. I view science and spirituality as complementary ways of knowing, each offering distinct but mutually enriching insights into the human condition. Empirical methods allow us to test and refine interventions that foster well-being, while qualitative and phenomenological approaches help us honor the depth, complexity, and individuality of spiritual experience. In my research, I aim to integrate these perspectives by operationalizing constructs such as transcendence, spiritual individuation, and spiritual well-being in ways that are both measurable and experientially authentic. This approach allows for the systematic study of spirituality's psychological benefits without reducing it to purely cognitive or behavioral processes. Ultimately, I see this integration as advancing a more holistic science of mind that recognizes both evidence and lived experience as essential forms of truth.

Role of the APA and Division 36

My involvement with APA Division 36 has been deeply inspiring. The Division provides a vibrant community where psychologists explore the integration of spirituality and religion within science and clinical practice. I've been continually impressed by the innovative work of its members, whose scholarship and leadership exemplify how psychology can meaningfully engage questions of faith, purpose, and human flourishing.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, I hope the psychology of religion and spirituality continues to evolve as a central, empirically grounded dimension of psychological science. The field is uniquely positioned to illuminate how meaning, transcendence, and connection contribute to mental health and resilience, particularly in an era marked by disconnection and existential uncertainty. My aspiration is for future research and clinical training to more fully integrate spirituality as a core component of whole-person care, informed by rigorous methodology and

cultural humility. I also hope to see expanded collaboration across disciplines, linking psychology with theology, neuroscience, and public health, to better understand the multidimensional nature of spiritual well-being. Ultimately, I envision a future in which spirituality is recognized not as an adjunct to mental health, but as an essential dimension of human flourishing.

A Day in the Life

My current roles integrate clinical practice, research, and teaching at the intersection of psychology and spirituality. A typical day includes individual clinical encounters and leadership of a comprehensive Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) program within a graduate and medical student mental health service. These sessions frequently address challenges related to mood regulation, identity development, and meaning-making, domains in which psychological and spiritual processes intersect.

I also direct a randomized controlled trial evaluating a novel spiritually informed cognitive-behavioral intervention designed to reduce mood symptoms and to explore purpose, meaning, and connection with the Transcendent as pathways to psychological well-being. In parallel, I teach a graduate-level course on Spiritual Wellness, which trains students to design and deliver evidence-based spiritual mind-body programs for diverse populations.

Graduate Student Profile

by Kristin Rabil & Brien Culhane

Kristin Rabil: Exploring Spirituality and Clinical Health Psychology



“In the coming years, I hope to see even more acceptance of and acknowledgement of the role that R/S may play in health through utilization of the Biopsychosocialspiritual framework...”

Kristin Rabil, B.A., is a Clinical Health Psychology Ph.D. student at CU Denver studying R/S's relationship with cardiovascular health and adherence to health behaviors in the Cardiovascular Health and Life Meaning Lab under Dr. Kevin Masters. The following is a graduate student profile on Kristin Rabil edited by Brien Culhane, B.S.

Could you describe your research focus and how it connects health psychology with spirituality?

My research broadly focuses on religious and existential influences on cardiovascular health and health behaviors. I am interested in learning more about how religion and spirituality (R/S), as well as meaning and purpose more generally, may be related to health and health behaviors. In thinking about social influences on health, R/S may be one dimension through which people find meaning and purpose, including reason to engage in certain health behaviors. More specifically, my thesis examined several dimensions of religious involvement (i.e., service attendance, private religious practices, religious identification, and a composite of R/S variables) as they relate to several indicators of cardiovascular health (i.e., Metabolic Syndrome, insulin resistance, interleukin-6, and c-reactive protein).

How does your work build on or differ from previous research in this area?

Research has examined the association between religion and various aspects of individual functioning, including physical health. Several systematic reviews and metaanalyses have highlighted the potential benefits of R/S on health, demonstrating associations between religious involvement and decreased all-cause mortality in healthy populations (e.g., Chida et al., 2009; Powell et al., 2003; Lucchese & Koenig, 2013; McCullough et al., 2000; Zimmer et al., 2016; Vanderweele, 2017). In general, my work aims to build upon this research by further exploring what dimensions of R/S may be protective (utilizing several dimensions of R/S involvement), for whom they may be protective (exploring group differences), and in what contexts they may be protective.

What inspired you to pursue a PhD in psychology, and what role has spirituality played in that journey?

I knew I wanted to pursue a career in psychology from my very first General Psychology course in undergrad. I was fascinated by the research and loved seeing what I was learning in class everywhere in my everyday life. Once I started as a research assistant, I loved the research process and had many more questions I wanted to explore. In short, I trusted that a PhD in Clinical Health Psychology would grant me the training and versatility to

apply my interests in a variety of settings. In terms of the role spirituality played, from a research lens, it added an additional layer of understanding how and why people do what they do. From a personal lens, my faith has both inspired me and brought me comfort, helping me balance the challenges of graduate school with other important parts of life.

How has your own view of health and spirituality evolved during your training?

This is a great question. Through my research and training, I now see more than ever before the indescribable complexity of both health and spirituality. I used to see R/S as something we cannot define or ever understand. I saw health as something that is impacted by genetics, environment, behaviors etc. but perhaps more predictable and measurable than R/S. Through my studies, I have learned that although R/S is indeed hard to measure and understand, it is possible, to some extent, to empirically study the role it plays in people's lives and health. It has also been valuable to experience clinically both sides of R/S with my patients, seeing how it can be a source of comfort for some and distress for others. In terms of health, I have learned that health can be nearly as unpredictable as R/S. We have excellent measures to study health behaviors, risk factors, and influences on health. Yet, regardless of how much we exercise or how many vegetables we eat, we cannot predict outcomes with 100% certainty. Overall, I have developed a sense of compatibility between the two fields and believe that they have together strengthened my training in being a scientist practitioner.

Where do you hope to see the fields of health psychology and spirituality heading in the next 5–10 years?

In the coming years, I hope to see even more acceptance of and acknowledgement of the role that R/S may play in health through utilization of the Biopsychosocialspiritual framework in research, clinical work, and healthcare.

What are you most passionate about outside of research and coursework?

My people! My family and friends are everything to me and I love nothing more than being with them. Even better, I love being with my family and friends in nature – watching the sunrise, going on a hike, or taking a pretty drive.

What do you feel like the world needs more of?

This is a big one. I feel the world could use more patience, curiosity, and open-mindedness, as well as meaning and purpose.

Community Profile

by William Wei & Brien Culhane

William Wei: Supporting Queer Spirituality at Old South Church



“One question I ask myself often is: if someone in the early Christian movement of Jesus’s time came to today’s Boston, what kind of ministry would they recognize as their own?”

William Wei is a student in the Master of Divinity Program at Boston University and Founder of Rainbow Table—a regular dinner party at Old South Church in Boston, MA by and for members of the queer community, creating a safe space for queer spirituality. The following is a profile on William Wei & Rainbow Table edited by Brien Culhane, B.S.

What is Rainbow Table?

It is a program for queer people at Old South Church in Boston, MA. We try to create a community and deepen our bond through meal sharing in a safe space that allows queer people to interface with spirituality among queer people. Anyone who identifies as queer is welcome to join—whether they identify as religious or spiritual.

What inspired you to start Rainbow Table at Old South?

Old South is one of the earliest Christian establishments in the United States and has a long history of fighting for LGBTQ+ rights. The recent retirement of our previous senior minister began a time of transition and allowed for more leadership from younger generations in the church. During this time, we reflected on who we are and have set out to be more queer affirming, to challenge the theology of Christian-Nationalism, and to decolonize ourselves.

As a Christian, I have learned that my faith ancestors started our religion by gathering regularly at the dinner table. In the Christian context, Holy Communion originates from a tradition of sharing dinners together and Heaven is described as a banquet in Biblical Scriptures.

One question I ask myself often is: if someone in the early Christian movement of Jesus’s time came to today’s Boston, what kind of ministry would they recognize as their own? I feel many of our rituals and worships are more recognizable to modern people, who know Christianity as a Western religion with a patriarchal creed that reflects more of a Greco-Roman philosophy than the teachings of Jesus. However, a dinner gathering of people who are bearing systematic oppression is more something that historical Jesus and his disciples would easily recognize.

Not only in Christianity, but in many other religions and cultures, gathering around the same table and sharing a banquet is a common method of building communities, establishing a sense of trust and belonging, and creating a shared collective identity. I recalled my own cultural roots in China where banqueting is the major way to deepen connection and form spirituality. Even today, in some rural areas in China, hosting a wedding banquet carries more cultural weight than the legal status and

license of marriage.

With all this in mind, I started to have conversations with the ministers at Old South about having a program of queer dinner parties and the impact it can have in both queer communities and our church community. During these discussions I realized how important it is to be mindful of religious trauma among the queer community and to act without an agenda of conversion—either in sexual or religious orientation. The gathering is intended to be a holy space for queer people just as they are.

With these realizations and inspirations, I composed a proposal for Rainbow Table's implementation, secured funding for it through the Church, and began hosting!

How do you see these dinners creating space for both spiritual and queer belonging?

Spirituality is formed in the context of social interactions. To nurture spirituality for queer people is to create a safe and authentic environment with the unique shared experiences and struggles of queer community in mind. I especially see a sense of belonging created in the process of serving others and being served by others, creating something beautiful and enjoyable together, and having a physical experience of being nurtured together.

What advice would you give to others who want to create inclusive spiritual spaces?

I would advise them to make sure the community they want to include has some representatives who are participating in the decision-making process.

What's the best compliment someone has given you about your community work?

That they are coming back the next time and bringing their friends with them!

What do you feel like the world needs more of?

A worldview that finds its meaning less in material possessions and more in spiritual connection with one another.

Editor's Notes

by Brien Culhane

Introduction and Call for Newsletter Submissions, Ideas & Feedback



"I'm honored and thrilled to be editing the Newsletter and invite all submissions, ideas, and feedback! For these, I can be reached at bwculhane@mclean.harvard.edu."

Brien Culhane, B.S. is a Clinical Research Assistant at McLean Hospital in Boston, MA volunteering in Dr. David Rosmarin's Spirituality and Mental Health Laboratory. Brien is applying for Clinical Psychology Ph.D. programs with interests in spiritually-integrated interventions in the biopsychosocialspiritual model, alongside virtue, well-being, and SGM spirituality.

Introduction

Hello! My name is Brien Culhane, and I'm pleased to introduce myself as Newsletter Editor for 2025–2026. I am presently working at McLean Hospital, where I study the biological bases of mental illness and volunteer as a research assistant in Dr. David Rosmarin's Spirituality & Mental Health Lab. At APA 2025, I greatly enjoyed meeting DIV36 members at poster presentations, talks, and the Division social. I decided to get involved and am excited to be working on this Letter—where I can put my love of design, literature, and engagement to good use.

Interest in R/S Studies

My primary interest in R/S is the design and implementation of spiritually-integrated interventions based in the biopsychosocialspiritual model—accounting for spirit, mind, body, and community/environment. I am curious to explore how this framework can be leveraged for the furtherance of physical as well as mental health

and human flourishing. Relatedly, I am interested in the study of virtue and how it intersects with spirituality, personality, and well-being. As a queer person of faith, I also intend to study sexual and gender minority spirituality and spiritual struggles and work with queer people navigating R/S in clinical practice upon graduation from a Clinical or Counseling Psychology Ph.D. program, for which I am applying this fall.

Call for Submissions, Ideas & Feedback

I'm honored and thrilled to be editing the Newsletter and invite all submissions, ideas, and feedback! For these, I can be reached at bwculhane@mclean.harvard.edu. I have greatly enjoyed designing and organizing this Letter and look forward to collaborating as we write for Winter, Spring, and Summer. My designs for now are to maintain in each issue the President's Column, Perspectives, Early Career Professionals, Graduate Students, and In The Community sections—as well as an Events page and my two cents here from time to time. If there are any additional sections you would like to see, please let me know! If there are any sections you would like to see change or disappear, well... let me know that, too! I look forward to working with you all to make the Newsletter what you enjoy and find useful, readable, and engaging. Thanks for reading and hope to talk to you soon.

Brien Culhane — bwculhane@mclean.harvard.edu

Events & Conference Attendance

Graduate Student Virtual Meet & Greet (Tuesday 11/03, 7:30PM, EST)

The Graduate Student Committee is hosting a virtual Meet & Greet. Come meet fellow students interested in R/S! [[Click here to RSVP](#)]

Association For Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (11/20–11/23)

Raegan Thompson & Brien Culhane will be in attendance at ABCT 2025! If you will be there too, please let us know. We'd love to see you!

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