

# APA Division 36 Newsletter

Society for the Psychology of Religion  
and Spirituality

Spring 2026

## President's Column

by Dr. David Rosmarin

### 6<sup>th</sup> Global Summit on Spirituality, Religion & Mental Health



*“People are struggling not just with symptoms, but with loneliness, identity, and meaning.”*

Week before last, nearly 400 chaplains, psychologists, psychiatrists, and faith leaders from almost 20 countries gathered at Harvard Medical School for two extraordinary days of conversation, connection, and collaboration during the 6th Global Summit on Spirituality, Religion & Mental Health. The Summit featured 89 presentations, 59 posters, and representation from over 15 faith traditions.

What emerged over these two days was a vision for mental health care that is more integrated, more relational, more spiritually informed—and most important of all, more human. People today are struggling not just with symptoms, but with loneliness, identity, and meaning. These are not purely medical problems. For many, they are spiritual ones. The Summit was a direct response to that gap, signaling that the field is ready to close it.

The presence of senior leaders from the American Psychiatric Association, the World Psychiatric Association, and major interfaith organizations made one thing clear: this conversation is no longer on the margins. Leaders from vastly different religious traditions—and many from none at all—sat together to wrestle honestly with questions at the heart of human thriving: belonging, purpose, and connection.

The in-person event may be over, but we are now entering a period of reflection and intentional building to carry this momentum forward. The field is ready for a future that takes the whole person seriously—one where spiritual care and mental health care are not in competition, but in collaboration.

Thank you to every presenter, attendee, and supporter who made this possible.

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# Perspectives

by Dr. Thomas G. Plante

## Call to Expand Research Evaluating Spiritual and Religious Practices



*“If we want to be taken seriously, even by those who are quick to not do so, we must conduct evidence based best practices and quality research at all times.”*

**Thomas G. Plante, Ph.D., ABPP** is the Augustin Cardinal Bea, S.J. University Professor of Psychology at Santa Clara University, where he also holds appointments in religious studies and the Jesuit School of Theology. He directs the Applied Spirituality Institute and is a scholar in residence at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. He maintains a private clinical practice in Menlo Park, CA and serves on the ABPP Ethics Committee. He is former Division 36 President (2011) and Council Representative (2016-2021). For more information, see [www.scu.edu/tplante](http://www.scu.edu/tplante).

**It is often funny how we end up getting into something or being led where we never expected.** I grew up in Rhode Island, traveled about 15 minutes away from my hometown to attend Brown University for college, and was convinced that I'd settle in Providence doing behavioral medicine and health psychology work affiliated with one of the Brown University hospitals. As an engaged Catholic, I knew that I would likely marry a fellow Catholic from New England too. My early career through graduate school and beyond was in behavioral medicine and in terms of research, laboratory work on the psychological benefits of aerobic exercise. Yet, here I am in the San Francisco Bay Area for almost 40 years,

married to a Jewish woman who was in my graduate school clinical psychology class at the University of Kansas, and doing research as well as clinical and consultation work focused on the psychology of religion, mostly working within the Catholic world. In terms of interfaith issues, the first line of my son's college admission essay in 2013 was, "Not many people can say that more Jesuit priests attended their bar mitzvah than rabbis." My wife and I celebrated our 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in 2012 while at the US Conference of Catholic Bishops meetings in Baltimore where I served on their child protection committee for a number of years. My wife remembers our special celebratory dinner in a local Italian restaurant surrounded by fellow diners who were Catholic bishops from around the country. Oy!

The interfaith world and getting out of one's narrow comfort zone has been very growthful and informative for me. I currently have an Interfaith America grant to support research as I conduct randomized clinical trials of the use of both the secular and religious versions of the Examen (i.e., a daily 5-step prayer and reflection from St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, that is very consistent with cognitive behavioral therapy tools) to improve mood states among various clinical and non-clinical populations. I have been conducting research on how to prime virtues like compassion, ethics, and

sacredness by exposing research participants to sacred and secular music as well as sacred scriptural stories such as the Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:25-37) in a religious or secular context. Clinically, I conduct psychological evaluations for those wishing to become Catholic, Episcopal, or Orthodox clergy and consult with religious groups when clerics have behavioral or psychiatric troubles (e.g., sex offending, gambling, eating disorders, anxiety, depression, or substance abuse troubles). Teaching at a Catholic and Jesuit university (Santa Clara University) has allowed a seamless integration of psychological and religion/spirituality interests in ways that were impossible or at least very difficult at secular universities that I have been affiliated with over the years (i.e., Brown, Kansas, Yale, Stanford).

Perhaps one of the most important insights and lessons learned is that much of the secular psychological world can be very leery of religion—especially from the Abrahamic traditions (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam). They tend to be more accepting of the eastern traditions (e.g., Buddhism). Sadly, there can be a lot of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination even among psychologists who should know and behave better. Serving on APA Council representing Division 36 for 6 years included moments of this difficult awareness. Yet, religion and spirituality are so important to the lives of many, including our students, clients, patients, and so forth and thus we all might use our interests, talents, and training to bridge the gap in a way that is helpful to all. There are many tools that the religious traditions have developed over the years that help people live their lives, and we in psychology can do more to not only learn about them but also to conduct quality research that examines their potential effectiveness. Plenty of research has been conducted on the effectiveness of mindfulness, for example, but why stop there? Randomized clinical trials and other quality methodological approaches could be used to examine the potential effectiveness of a wide variety of liturgical, spiritual, meditative, contemplative, community engagement, charitable works, sacred readings, and other religious and spiritual strategies for

better living. There are countless studies that need to be conducted and I hope that those who are reading this article, especially our terrific students and young professionals, might be inspired to conduct the much needed research and clinical work in the psychology of religion and spirituality area that is so desperately needed. If we want to be taken seriously, even by those who are quick to not do so, we must conduct evidence based best practices and quality research at all times. We also must find appropriate quality venues and outlets to publish and discuss this work as well.

While APA journals such as the *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* and *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* as well as quality non-APA journals on similar themes (e.g., *Pastoral Psychology*, *Journal of Religion and Health*, *Integratus*) are terrific outlets, publishing in the highest quality mainstream journals (e.g., *American Psychologist*, *Psychological Bulletin*, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*) may ultimately yield more impact over time. Presenting our research at top quality conferences and conventions helps as well as press interactions and social media efforts too. So, in a nutshell, go get'em team! We have work to do!

# Early Career Profile

by Dr. Victor Counted & Dr. Micheline Anderson

## Victor Counted: Advancing a Global Science of Spirituality



*“The bigger challenge is not whether science and spirit can coexist but how to do justice to both without flattening either.”*

**Victor Counted, Ph.D.**, is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Regent University. He completed his Ph.D. in Health Psychology at Western Sydney University, Australia, and his Ph.D. in Psychology of Religion from the University of Groningen, Netherlands. His new book, *Bonding with God*, is available now from Baker Academic. The following is a profile on Victor edited by Micheline Anderson.

### Path into the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality

My journey began with lived experience long before it became an academic one. Growing up and spending formative years in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, I was immersed in cultures where religion was a public, embodied and spatial reality, rather than a private matter. I watched how faith shaped people's sense of belonging even amid displacement, and I found myself asking psychological questions long before I had the language to call them that.

Two threads eventually converged to shape my scholarly identity. The first was attachment theory, which gave me a framework for understanding the self, others, and human relationship with God and the psychology of sacred belonging. The second was place attachment theory in environmental psychology, which helped me understand why the ‘where’ of religious life matters so

profoundly, and why sacred sites, nature, and local environments are not merely backdrops to one’s faith. We form psychological connections to significant places, and these ties are central to understanding religious life and our sensing of the sacred in place. These two attachment threads—to God and to place—gave rise to what I now call the Spiritual Ties to Place—which is the idea that people form deep psychological bonds to the sacred dimensions of meaningful environments, and that convergence has shaped the trajectory of my research in the psychology of religion and spirituality ever since.

### Current Work and Research Focus

I am currently a core faculty in a Doctor of Clinical Psychology (PsyD) program as an Associate Professor and working to strengthen and expand our institutional research culture as the Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Regent University, Virginia. Personally, my program of research examines the psychological processes that shape human flourishing across cultures, and I organize it around what I call a Four-Stage Framework of Human Flourishing. The first stage concerns the mechanisms that sustain flourishing. These are the psychosocial, spiritual, spatial, and physiological processes that make a flourishing life possible. The second stage examines the disruptors that unsettle those mechanisms: displacement, resource loss, and attachment disruptions that can fracture a person's

sense of belonging and meaning. The third stage focuses on the adaptive responses through which people recover or reconstruct flourishing. These are hope, forgiveness, meaning-making, and spiritually integrated care. And the fourth stage traces the outcomes: happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial/material stability. This framework bridges positive psychology, psychology of religion, environmental psychology, and health psychology in ways that I think few research programs currently attempt.

I founded the Abundant Life Flourishing Lab at Regent University, where we are developing tools to systematically study Christian flourishing science globally. I also serve as Researcher on the Global Flourishing Study (GFS), with a Faculty Affiliate appointment at Harvard's Human Flourishing Program. Within the GFS, I am leading papers on hope, belonging, and place satisfaction—three constructs that sit at the heart of my broader research commitments; which also means the collaboration is not peripheral to my work but an extension of it. That global scope is also something I take seriously as a scientific commitment. As both Associate Editor of the *Journal of Positive Psychology* and Springer Book Series Editor for *Religion, Spirituality, and Health*, I am in a position to help shape what the field regards as credible and central to human flourishing, and I use that position deliberately to push flourishing science beyond its predominantly Western, North American foundations.

Two substantive threads run through my research itself. The first is the cross-cultural scope. I am actively expanding my work to understand what flourishing looks like beyond Western contexts, e.g., what its mechanisms, textures, and expressions are in communities that existing frameworks were never built to describe. A forthcoming volume I am co-editing for Oxford University Press on *Human Flourishing in Africa* is one concrete expression of that commitment, alongside the Africa Flourishing Initiative's study and the development

of culturally-grounded instruments like the African Flourishing Index. The second thread is the spatial dimension. I am particularly interested in how religion and spirituality unfold within—and are shaped by—the places where people live, worship, grieve, and belong. This thread has produced what I consider some of my most distinctive work in the psychology of religion, including *The Psychology of Religion and Place* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), *Place and Post-Pandemic Flourishing* (Springer, 2021), and *Place, Spirituality, and Wellbeing* (2023), and it gave rise to the *Spiritual Ties to Place* framework, which is the subject of a forthcoming book with Cambridge University Press. My most recent book, *Bonding with God: Attachment Theory and the Psychology of Faith* (Baker Academic, 2026), brings the other foundational thread—i.e., attachment—to a broader audience, completing what I think of as two sides of the same scholarly coin.

### **Integrating Science and Spirit**

I have come to see this as a false tension, though I understand why it persists. The bigger challenge is not whether science and spirit can coexist but how to do justice to both without flattening either. My approach has always been to pursue empirical rigor and phenomenological depth simultaneously rather than treating them as competing commitments.

On the empirical side, I develop and validate psychometric tools (e.g., the *Spiritual Ties to Place Scale*, the *Holy Spirit Attachment Scale*, the *Christian Flourishing Index*) that meet scientific standards and can generate cumulative, comparable knowledge. But I hold those tools alongside a genuine respect for the narrative and theological dimensions of people's lives that numbers alone cannot reach. One area where this integration has been especially generative is my effort to complement etic frameworks such as the standardized, cross-cultural instruments that dominate the field of psychology with emic tools and perspectives that are developed from within specific cultural and religious communities. The African Flourishing Index is one example of this: rather than simply importing Western flourishing measures into

African contexts, we are building instruments that take seriously what African communities themselves understand flourishing to mean. That kind of methodological humility, I think, is what responsible integration of science and spirit actually requires.

### **Role of the APA and Division 36**

Division 36 has become a genuine intellectual home for me in a way that few professional spaces are. Before moving to the US from Sydney, I led the Society for the Psychology of Religion in Australia and New Zealand (SPRANZ), and I remain involved in the executive board of the International Association for the Psychology of Religion (IAPR). But Division 36 holds a particular significance for me as a psychologist who trains doctoral students within an APA-accredited program. My students are being formed within an APA training framework—e.g., its standards, its credentialing, its vision of what rigorous psychological science looks like. Having a home within APA where the psychology of religion and spirituality is treated as serious science rather than a specialty on the margins—and playing a role in driving that—means that the questions my students care most about (e.g., faith, meaning-making, spiritual wellbeing, flourishing) are not something they have to defend or apologize for. Division 36 makes those questions feel like ‘legitimate’ psychology, and that matters truly for how I think about forming the next generation of scholars in this field. For a researcher whose work crosses multiple subfields of psychology and who has navigated belonging across several countries and cultures, that sense of legitimate intellectual home matters more than it might seem.

The Division has also connected me to colleagues whose rigor and breadth continue to challenge and expand my own thinking. Looking ahead, I hope to contribute to Division 36 by helping push its intellectual borders outward—bringing different under-represented emic voices and frameworks more fully into the scholarly conversations the Division hosts, and making the case that a truly scientific psychology of religion must be a genuinely global one.

### **Looking Ahead**

I hope to see the psychology of religion and spirituality become more genuinely global. So much of what we know about religious coping, spiritual development, and faith and wellbeing has been generated from Western, and often specifically North American Protestant samples. That is beginning to change, and I want to be part of accelerating that shift. Through the cross-cultural work I am developing, my hope is that the next generation of scholars will have access to theories, instruments, and datasets that actually represent the diversity of human religious experience across cultures, contexts, and traditions.

I also want to see the field take the psychology of place more seriously. Almost every psychological construct we study (e.g., belonging, meaning, identity, hope) is shaped by the environments in which people live and worship and grieve. We rarely name that, and I think we should. As someone who has moved across many cultures and places and felt firsthand how place shapes everyday life, this feels less like a niche interest and more like a fundamental gap in the field's self-understanding. Finally, I hope we can become bolder about applied translation and move our findings into clinical practice, religious community life, and policy in ways that make a tangible difference for people navigating faith, suffering, and meaning in real time. Some progress has already been made in our field. But there is much more to do, and I am especially committed to doing it in ways that form the next generation of scholars who will carry this work into places and questions I have not yet imagined.

# Graduate Student Profile

by Adlyn Perez-Figueroa & Brien Culhane

## Adlyn Perez-Figueroa: Exploring Identity and Spirituality



*“One thing I hope to see is a stronger collaboration between researchers, educators, mental health professionals, and clergy. Clergy are the primary mental health providers of the United States...”*

**Adlyn Perez-Figueroa, M.S.**, is a Clinical-Counseling Psychology Ph.D. student at Utah State University studying the intersection of LGBTQ identities and religiosity/spirituality under Dr. Tyler Lefevor. The following is a profile on Adlyn edited by Brien Culhane, B.S.

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

My research focus is centered on LGBTQI+ spirituality, especially as it pertains to Christian populations, and spiritual abuse and trauma in general. I also have a keen interest in the integration of LGBTQI+ identities and religious/spiritual identities.

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

Previous research has focused mostly on the “identity conflict” that LGBTQI+ individuals experience when they encounter misalignments between their LGBTQI+ identities and their faith traditions. However, my research proposes a different conceptualization. Instead of internal spiritual/identity conflict, I believe that spiritual distress in this population is mostly due to systemic spiritual abuse and other aversive experiences in spiritual spaces. This may be a more adequate explanation for why an unreasonably large number of LGBTQI+ individuals

demonstrate mental health issues in connection with spiritual issues. This can also explain why this spiritual distress is often accompanied by elements of traumatic stress, and this includes disruptions in identity and sense of self. My research steps away from the idea that spiritual distress within LGBTQI+ individuals is simply an identity problem. I believe there is also a need to re-evaluate the idea that spiritual abuse is an unusual phenomenon that occurs only in exceptional contexts, such as cults. There is growing awareness that spiritual abuse is far more common, and it can—and does—operate systemically.

### **What drew you to study spirituality in relation to health?**

My interests were purely focused on minoritized communities at first, especially the LGBTQI+ community. However, as I gained clinical and research experience with this population, the predominance of spiritually-themed issues became hard to ignore. This was my first introduction to the study of spirituality.

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

My main inspiration for pursuing a PhD in psychology was the desire to teach. I also perceived a need that was not being met. Clergy do not receive proper training on LGBTQI+ issues, and mental health professionals are

equally lacking in skill when it comes to spiritual issues. This has left LGBTQI+ individuals in a no-man's-land when it comes to seeking supportive resources, despite the high demand. Spirituality is a major gap in mental health care, and this has influenced my trajectory in psychology.

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

Working within a population in which spiritual practice is simultaneously beneficial and problematic has shaped my view of spiritual practice and spiritual belief systems. This has helped me develop my own view: spiritual practices and beliefs—similar to mental health practices—should serve to foster good health, quality of life, and life satisfaction. When they don't, this is something that should be explored.

**What's the best piece of professional advice anyone has ever given you?**

Don't ever get isolated in professional practice. Whether you go into teaching, research, or clinical work, make sure you have a community of professionals around you. As a bonus, another excellent piece of advice is that the purpose of a dissertation is not to save the world, but rather to demonstrate that you can competently do research. So keep it simple. If you want to attempt to save the whole world, do it after you graduate.

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

One thing I hope to see is a stronger collaboration between researchers, educators, mental health professionals, and clergy. Clergy are the primary mental health providers of the United States, especially for populations that can't afford formal mental health care. This puts enormous pressure on clergy to tackle many problems that go beyond the spiritual counseling that they are trained for. I think it would be beneficial for clergy to avail themselves of the support and resources that researchers and mental health professionals can provide. Conversely, researchers, educators, and mental health providers who seek to have a positive impact on

communities can find powerfully effective allies in clergy. As an example, collaborations between pastoral networks and university research teams in Chicago successfully reduced HIV infection rates in the city. These professions can accomplish far more in collaboration than they can working in isolation.

**What advice would you give other graduate students who want to study spirituality and psychology?**

There are two things that I believe are most important for graduate students to seek out: life experience and a good mentor. It is valuable to understand how spirituality operates in the real lives of people and to gain exposure to different perspectives. As for a mentor, there are several qualities to look for. First, they can teach you advanced qualitative and quantitative skills. Many topics in religion and spirituality are new to research, and you will need those skills if you are going to pioneer them. Second, a good mentor has deep knowledge of spiritual and religious issues without being completely immersed in them. They should not be strongly against or for spiritual practice, but should instead have the ability to step back and view data and trends objectively. Third, it is beneficial when a mentor has a balance between allowing you to explore new ideas and making sure you don't get in over your head. As I said, many topics in this field are novel, under-researched, or poorly understood. While this can be exciting, it can also be a challenge for students. It is important for a mentor to make sure that you take on projects that are appropriate for your level of knowledge and analytic skill.

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

Snowboarding. Or more accurately, an attempt to do it. I must admit that snowboarding has taught me more humility than any sermon I have ever attended.

**What do you feel like the world needs more of?**

Education. I can not think of a single sociopolitical problem that does not have lack of education as its root cause.

# Editor's Notes

by Brien Culhane

## A Brief Note to the Readers of the Division 36 Newsletter



*“Hello Everyone! I am just adding in a few sentences here to say thank you for reading and to field potential successors for Editor of the Newsletter.”*

**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 will be joining the Clinical Psychology Ph.D. program at Georgia State University in Atlanta, GA beginning this August, studying under Dr. Page Anderson.

### A Brief Note to the Readers

Hello Everyone! I am just adding in a few sentences here to say thank you for reading and to field potential successors for Editor of the Newsletter. I will be beginning a Ph.D. program in Clinical Psychology this August and will focus my full attention on the program as I begin. Consequently, I am curious to know whether anyone reading this Letter has any interest in arranging the Newsletter going forward. If so, please reach out to me at [bwculhane@mclean.harvard.edu](mailto:bwculhane@mclean.harvard.edu) or at my new email address [bculhane1@student.gsu.edu](mailto:bculhane1@student.gsu.edu).

It has been a great deal of fun redesigning the Newsletter and getting to speak with everyone, whether virtually or in person, whom I have had the pleasure of featuring here. Working on the Newsletter has been a wonderful way to meet people in the Division and beyond who are passionate about exploring the relationship between spirituality, religion, and mental health.

This field remains important. Now more than ever. I am very grateful to belong to it and to continue this work throughout my career. Along the way, I look forward to meeting more of the fabulous people who are working to bring spiritual health and spiritual intelligence into mainstream psychology and modern life.

Thank you again for reading! It has truly been a joy for me to participate in the Division this way and to speak with you all. If anyone has any parting feedback or questions for me, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Looking forward to seeing you all soon! Many blessings.

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