

Spring 2025

# APA Division 36 Newsletter

Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality

## President's Column



### Welcoming you to a new year with Division 36

by Connie Svob, PhD

Welcome to the first Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality Newsletter of 2025!

One of the main goals of my presidency has been to find ways to help build and foster a sense of community and collaboration for our members – for everyone to feel welcome and to have their voices heard. So, this Newsletter is for YOU. It is one way to enhance communication and for you to get to know who else is out here and interested in some of the same topics as you!

In this first issue of the year, I thought it would be good to take a moment to look back at the formation of our Society and the values that were important to making it what it is today. Our APA Council Representative, Theresa Tisdale, shares a historical overview of the formation of our Society. Her informative piece helps lay the foundation of where we've come from, who we've been, and who we may still want to become. In this Issue, we also feature a Member Spotlight and introduce you to Dr. Job Chen, our Interim EDI Officer on the Executive Board who is interested in experimental empirical research and mysticism. And, finally, we share a conversation with our Graduate Student Representative, Jason Reid, and Graduate Student member and Associate Editor of this Newsletter, Raegan Thompson. Jason and Raegan give voice to the new generation of psychologists of religion and spirituality by considering and envisioning their hopes for where our field may go and grow.

The Newsletter is just an "amuse bouche" – a bite-size appetizer to whet your appetite and become curious about the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality and the potential it has to offer! I hope you enjoy it.

Connie Svob, PhD

President of the Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality

## Member Spotlight



## Introducing Job Chen, PhD, APA Division 36 Interim EDI Officer

by Connie Svob, PhD

Meet Dr. Job Chen! Chen stepped in graciously as Interim EDI Officer of our Executive Board this past fall. Here is a little background on who he is. We are pleased to introduce him to those of you who might not know him.

Chen earned his PhD in Psychology (2017) and a Master's in Mathematics from the University of Oregon, following a Master's degree in Psychology of Religion from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where he studied with Ralph Hood. Since 2022, he has been an Associate Professor at the School of Nursing and an affiliate faculty member in Health Psychology at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. Prior to joining UNC Charlotte, he served as an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Clemson University.

In 2023, Chen received the Early Career Award from the International Association for the Psychology of Religion. He is the Associate Editor for both the *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* and the *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*.

Chen is actively engaged in promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). He previously held a council position with the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and now chairs the Interdisciplinary Engagement Committee for the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, working to enhance the diversity and inclusion of scholars from disciplines beyond sociology of religion. His scholarly research focuses on mysticism, spirituality, and health, with a particular interest in understudied areas of Daoism. Coming from a multiethnic East Asian background and as a first-generation immigrant and college attendee in the United States, Chen is highly attuned to cultural and equity issues. We are grateful for his service to our Society!

To see more about Chen's work, head to <https://pages.charlotte.edu/jobchen/>

# Perspectives



# Our Identity as a Society: Past, Present, and Future

## Part I: The Road to Inclusion

By Theresa Clement Tisdale, PhD, PsyD, ABPP,  
Council Representative 2025-2027

The theme of the April 2024 Mid-Year Conference for the Society, held on the lovely and inviting campus of Princeton Theological Seminary, was “Religious and Spiritual Perspectives: A Call for Unity, Inclusivity, and Intersectionality”. I was invited by the Planning Committee to give the final plenary address and was looking forward to presenting a model and method of clinical interviewing and case conceptualization that I had been developing based on APA’s Clinical Guidelines for Multicultural Practice.

However, as I listened to the topics and messages of presenters, as well as comments and questions of conference participants, I began to reflect on the history of the Society in light of the conference theme, particularly because it was framed as a call for unity, inclusivity, and intersectionality. This was the first in-person Mid-Year since 2019 and the enthusiasm and energy of the group was palpable.

I have been a member of the Society for over 30 years and served in various capacities so I have borne witness to seismic shifts over the years. By the second day of the conference, I sensed an opportunity to set aside my planned topic and instead focus on reflecting with participants about the Society’s history and the challenges we have faced internally (with ourselves) and externally (with APA as an organization), particularly with respect to our identity. In many respects, advocacy for inclusivity has been at the heart of Society endeavors. Something about looking back seemed quite important, even necessary, in light of many conference presentations that focused on the present and future of Society endeavors.

Deciding to entirely revise a presentation while attending a conference is not something I have ever done. It was with no small measure of trepidation that I undertook the call (as the conference conveners invoked through the title).

I began with one of my favorite quotes:

*“Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward”*

Soren Kierkegaard

I explained to those at the plenary that I had decided to shift my focus and topic because of the emergent conversations and considerations over the past few days and how I sensed the Society’s collective need and desire to be clear and grounded while

charting a course for the future. What follows is a summary of what I shared.

### **Looking Back for Context: The Long Road for Inclusion**

APA was founded in 1892. By 1944, 19 Divisions (an unfortunate designation in my opinion) had been formed; Clinical and Counseling were the two largest divisions. Independent of APA's evolution, between the years of 1946-1948 (historical records differ), an organization was formed entitled the *American Catholic Psychological Association (ACPA)*. The purpose and intention of the members was to bring the discipline of psychology to Catholic Universities and to bring a Catholic perspective to the field of psychology.

In 1970, the group recast its name and vision. Now meeting concurrently with the APA National Convention, *Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues (PIRI)* redefined the purpose of the group to include: identifying psychological issues relevant to religious groups, developing resources for church groups, and promoting the application of psychology to religious issues.

As the endeavors of PIRI unfolded and gained traction, the group developed a proposal presented to APA in 1974 requesting status as a division. The request was denied. At that time, APA cited the reason being that there were too many divisions in the organization. However, the members of PIRI were undeterred in their quest for inclusion. In 1976, the second proposal was successful and *Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues (PIRI)* became Division 36 of APA.

Almost two decades of theoretical, academic, empirical, and clinical endeavors unfolded within the Division and understandably, growing pains began to emerge as identity and purpose further evolved. In 1993, the Division changed the name to *Psychology of Religion* with a clarified focus on: encouraging research, theory, and practice relating to psychology and religion, and disseminating data on religious issues. The psychologists interested in religious issues clearly wanted to make a statement about the intention to influence the field of psychology as a whole.

One expression of this influence was through the founding of the currently titled *Journal for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (PRS) in 2009 as an APA sponsored journal of Division 36. The name of the *Journal* was revised to include spirituality in order to correspond to the Division name and identity change in 2011. Under the leadership of founding Editor Ralph Piedmont, the journal grew in reputation and circulation. Currently under the leadership of Crystal L. Park, the *Journal* has a 5-year impact factor of 2.9.

### **What's In a Name? Identity, Vision, and Purpose**

This timeless question first posed by The Bard was a subject of heated within-group discussion, debate, and disagreement in the years leading up to the next revision to the Division. In the 2011 issue of this newsletter, then president Ed Worthington made an articulate impassioned plea for the membership to make three significant shifts. One was the inclusion of *spirituality* in the name and identity of the Division. There were many outspoken advocates on both sides of the question to change or not to change. Extensive rationale was provided through multiple venues for members to read and consider.

Second was the proposal to rename the Division the *Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. The designation Division was flet by many members to be an undesirable focus on internal divisions and divisiveness. Society was thought to more accurately reflect the intention to become a welcoming and collaborative group of professionals. The third measure was a proposed change in membership qualifications, allowing people outside of APA to become affiliate professionals of the Society. At the time, this inclusive measure was being adopted by a number of divisions that also chose to rename themselves as Societies and invite non-APA members to become affiliates. Voting yielded adoption of all three measures.

The road to inclusion of the Society/Division within the organization of APA, as well as the inclusion of spirituality in the identity and name of the Society was very long indeed, and came as the result of the diligent and persistent efforts of many of our colleagues over almost 50 years.



## The Road to Inclusion in Professional Ethics and Diagnosis

Over the past several decades, other sea changes related to inclusion have occurred in both the Ethics Code of APA and the DSM of the American Psychiatric Association. The APA Ethics Code was established in 1952 and published in 1953. As definitions of diversity and codes of conduct were added in subsequent revisions, religion as an aspect of diversity was conspicuously absent. Through concerted efforts of many within the Society, religion was added to the 1992 revision in the areas of: Boundaries of Competence, Human Difference, Respecting Others, and Harassment. In this instance, inclusion took 40 years.

Advocacy for inclusion in diagnostic criteria was also a long and concerted endeavor by many professionals within multiple disciplines. The first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM I) was published in 1952; however, it was not until the 1994 DSM IV that the V-Code of Religious or Spiritual Problem was added to Other Conditions that May Be the Focus of Clinical Attention. Another inclusion advocacy endeavor that was 40 years in the making.

### Summary

These reflections provide context for us to recognize and acknowledge that the road to diversity, equity, and inclusion within and beyond our Society has been long and fraught with challenges. Over decades, the persistent and devoted efforts of many, many of our colleagues resulted in religion and spirituality moving from a place of marginalization to a rightful place of inclusion in the field of psychology through our recognized status within APA as a national organization. Also, within our own organization, the long road to inclusion has resulted in spirituality being linked to religion in our name, vision, and purpose; the invitation to those outside APA to become affiliate professionals; as well as the intention, through shift from division to society, to become a collaborative group of colleagues from various professional guilds and disciplines dedicated to advancing theory, research, teaching, and practice in the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality in a way that reflects diversity, equity, and inclusion.

In Part II of this series, we will continue our look back by featuring some of the key contributors to the field over time. We will also consider questions of who comprises our membership, how we are funded, in what contexts we work and serve, and in what ways we might creatively partner with other societies within APA so that religion and spirituality are well and accurately represented within our organization, field, and society.

Any factual errors are the responsibility of the author. Feedback may be provided to [tctisdale@apu.edu](mailto:tctisdale@apu.edu)

# Student Perspectives



## A Dialogue on New Directions in the Field

By Raegan Thompson and Jason Reid

**Raegan Thompson:**

What do you feel is the most significant gap in the clinical psychology field right now regarding what we offer to our future clients and patients?

**Jason Reid:**

There is a growing hunger for religion and spirituality within the field. Many third-wave behavioral treatments like ACT and DBT have begun to incorporate elements of spirituality. However, there's more that can be done to fully integrate spirituality into a holistic form of mental health treatment, especially considering the growing number of people who identify as spiritual but not religious. It's also crucial to support those who are seeking guidance outside of traditional religious frameworks. This will be increasingly important as we move forward.

**Raegan:** I appreciate how you highlighted the role of spirituality in third-wave therapies. As we know, people are often deeply committed to their religious or spiritual practices and will do whatever they can to align their behavior with those beliefs. It's vital to recognize this without over-pathologizing individuals. Religion can be highly protective of mental health and should not be overlooked. Personally, I'd like to see the development of a tool that helps clinicians differentiate between psychosis and a religious or spiritual experience.

**Jason:** That's a great point, especially for younger folks joining the field and those who are dealing with mental health concerns. Religion can be, has been, and can continue to be an essential part of our experience. Ensuring that people can connect with an authentic sense of the transcendent is vital. Another hot-button topic right now is psychedelics and how that can lead to experiences that people deem mystical. These are often described in ways that are typically akin to religious or spiritual experiences. Understanding the difference between psychosis and mystical experience will be essential as we move forward, particularly as psychedelic use increases. Integrating these experiences, especially those induced by substances like psilocybin, is going to be an important part of the future to ensure that these psychoactive healing agents are being used to their most extensive healing capacity, and also to make sure people come out feeling less distress and greater well-being.

**Raegan:** You bring up such an exciting point about psychedelic use and how it occasionally leads to a profound religious or spiritual experience. What we do know about psychedelic use is that a large population of people have these otherworldly experiences that drastically change their spiritual foundation. It's very personal to them and discussing that change with a psychologist can be intimidating. Considering the dark history of the field, it's understandable that people may fear being pathologized. It can be highly discouraging for people to share their experiences if they feel like they will be judged. Keeping an open mind when conducting research or treating your clients is crucial.

**Jason:** I completely agree. I'd like to discuss what is necessary to be open-minded care givers to the range of clients we will meet. We will need to expand our moral boundaries and deepen our compassion. We will need more room for personal growth as we explore new territories to meet our clients' needs. I believe this includes expanding our empathy to encompass not just humans, but non-human living creatures as well. Building a bond between human and non-human beings will help add meaning and purpose to our work, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic mental health framework. This could be a mutually beneficial partnership and should be integrated within a framework of mental health that expands our humanity, extending it to all peoples and also the non-human world.

**Raegan:** It's vital that we develop techniques to expand our empathy and broaden our understanding of different experiences. As clinicians, we will encounter people whose experiences are unlike anything we've known. These individuals may have experiences that

we could never have imagined. It's crucial to consistently check in with our own empathy and remain aware of our role in these interactions. While it can be challenging, this is an essential practice I hope to continue to grow in.

**Jason:** I really resonate with your point, Raegan. The last thing I want to touch on is how the framework of religion and spirituality itself impacts our work in psychology. Integrating this interdisciplinary approach will infuse our future studies with creativity and make our work more inclusive for people of all backgrounds. Understanding religion and spirituality as clinicians allows us to help others connect with their transcendent sense of self in a way that is authentic to them, rooted in meaning and purpose, and develops character strengths.

**Raegan:** This is a unique point and it also extends to how psychologists relate to each other. It can be difficult to drive future studies if there are not enough spaces for people to learn and collaborate. All perspectives on how religion influences one's mental health are valuable. We can learn from each other, no matter what kind of background one comes from.

**Jason:** It's leading to positive movements within the field overall. Being in the focus area of religion and spirituality improves the research I can engage in with clients and also has a meaningful effect on who I am as a person. I am very optimistic about where things are going and how religion and spirituality could be deeply interwoven and integrated into the field. We face many challenges right now within the broader world. But this marriage, so to speak, between psychology and religion and spirituality can bring a lot of positive change.

**Raegan:** Every voice is a valuable one. That's how we create a safe and unique space for all humans.