

# The New Discourse on Spirituality and its Implications for the Helping Professions

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# Overview

- What is the new discourse on spirituality?
- How has it impacted society?
- Spirituality and the helping professions
- How the new discourse supports the helping professions
- How the new discourse challenges traditional modes of helping
- The potential for practitioners and clients

# The New Discourse On Spirituality

- Sutcliffe (2003)–describes the characteristics of a fundamentally novel form of religious practice
- Primarily a Western discourse, centred in North American and European culture
- Reflects the influence and confluence of a variety of broader trends in culture, society, religious and spiritual practice

# Trends

- The decline of institutional religion in the West since the 1950's
- Modern information, communication and transportation technologies; globalization
- Increasing immigration and the influx of new religious practices; growth of interest in and exposure to Eastern religions

# Rise of the “New Age” movement

- Which itself has been traced back to a variety of influences ranging from mid-19<sup>th</sup> century spiritualism (Hunt, 2003)-and most recently the 1960's counter-culture (Hanegraaff, 2001)
- Moving from conceptualizations of the New Age to the New Spirituality

# Describing the Discourse

A post-modern expression of religious and spiritual practice defined by the following features:

- Dissidence and Individuality
- Primacy of Subjective Experience
- Functionality
- Holism
- Psychological understanding of spirituality
- “Mix n’ match” religion (Hunt, 2003, p.144)

Sutcliffe, 2003

# Dissidence and Individuality

“The new spirituality involves a one-to-one relationship with the Godhead...Why do we need a human to arbitrate between ourselves and god when we have our own link?” (David Icke, p.366).

“It is time for everyone to become a shaman, a metaphysician, a dream-weaver, a walker-between-worlds.” (Edwards, p. 218)

As quoted in Sutcliffe, 2003.

# Functionality

- Spirituality not just for its own accord, but it has a purpose and a function.
- Self-healing, growth, realizing our potential, “true self” (Hunt, 2003, p.135).
- Spiritual seeker applies spiritual wisdom to “make things work; achieve goals”, and create “meaning in everyday life” (Sutcliffe, 2003, p.221).

# Personal Experience

- Focus the on subjective, felt experience of the divine



spirituality

- Results in current proliferation of definitions for spirituality:
  - Immanent
  - Transcendent
  - Inside the self
  - In the world

Both  
/And

# Holism

- Fragmentation is a central cause of personal and social difficulties
- Holism, an awareness and respect for the inter-connectedness of all things is the counter-balance that is emphasized

Hanegraaff, 2001

# Psychology is Central

- Conflation of religious and psychological language
- Use of psychological tools & concepts such as affirmations, visualization and positive thinking as spiritual healing tools
- Psychological healing /transformation to higher levels of consciousness is envisioned as the engine which drives and enables physical healing and social change

Heelas, 1996

# Syncretism

## “Mix n’ Match” Religiosity

- Concepts and practices from disparate traditions are disembedded from their context and synthesized
- McGuire (as quoted in Sutcliffe, 2003, p.204-205) talks about a healing group member that combines “re-birthing, crystal healing, colonics, meditation journals, shiatsu and dance therapy” to constitute her own personal spiritual practice

# Impact of the Discourse

- “Most formidable thorough-going religious culture that currently exists in modern society” (Bainbridge, 1997, p.371)
- “Holistic consciousness has made incisive roads into public thinking about such issues as ecology, peace, gender, health...taking the movement from the alienated fringes of public life to its centre.” (Hunt, 2003, p.145)

# Impact continued....

- Yoga studios on every corner/rise in use of alternative practitioners
- New Age literature one of the fastest growing areas of the publishing market (Publisher's weekly, 2002)
- TV shows on angels, witches, mediums etc.
- Dalai Lama and other spiritual leaders become celebrities on the order of pop stars
- Popular interest in the integration of Eastern religious traditions and practices

# In the Traditional Sphere

- Decline of mainline, institutional churches
- Rise in Pentecostal /charismatic churches
- Traditional populations endorse new beliefs
- Mainline congregations have re-introduced healing services

# Spirituality and the Helping Professions

- Rooted in religion-earliest healers  
community religious leaders, medicine  
men, shamans, priests
- Social work got its start in church setting,  
as did counselling in the United States
- Seminal thinkers such as Rogers, Maslow,  
Frankl drew on spirituality and religion

# Rejection of Spirituality/Religion:

- Rejection of spiritual/religious approaches with the rise of science at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century
- Pre-dominance of psycho-analytic theory

# Rejection visible in:

- Absence from disciplinary discussions, texts, research, funding, training
- Suspicion, prejudice against religiosity in clinical practice

# Discourse Supports the Helping Professions

- Promotes therapy and other psychological tools for healing, increases its social acceptance
- Popularizes psychological tools and concepts
- Inspires/supports new developments

# Discourse Challenges the Disciplines

## Professions

- Professional
- Formal
- Scientific
- Rational focus
- Expert healing

## Discourse

- Lay
- Informal
- Intuitive
- Emotional Focus
- Self-healing

# Discourse Impacts the Disciplines

- Increased recognition of religion and spirituality over the last 10 years
- Calls for training in spirituality/religion in medical, social work, psychology schools
- Increased research and re-discovery of sub-disciplines (psychology of religion)
- Emergence of models for incorporating spirituality/religion in practice
- Enters mainstream: DSM-IV-R

# Discourse impacts the disciplines..

- Spiritual tools/approaches are incorporated into helping disciplines
- Medicine wheel model of health and wellness in health promotion
- Kabat-Zinn et al. (1998) mindfulness-based stress reduction
- Religious therapies which integrate reading from the Bible or Koran

# Are we heading towards a synthesis?

- Psycho-spiritual approaches to healing Needleman (as quoted in Heelas & Kohn, 1986) observes: "The shrinks are beginning to sound like gurus, and the gurus are beginning to sound like shrinks." (p.296)
- "Spiritual change has become a major mental health growth industry" (Lambert, Garfield & Bergin, 2004)

# Positive Potential of Synthesis:

- Balance of traditional rational-scientific approach with a spiritual-artistic approach, renewal of the disciplines
- Wilber's (2000) model of the full spectrum therapist, integration of Western and Eastern healing approaches

# Positive Potential continued..

- Promising new resource
- 24-hour, cost free support
- Psychological and spiritual practices become a bridge for integrated development
- New models for dealing with spiritual issues such as spiritual crisis (Grof & Grof, 1989)

# Potential risks of the current situation..

- Model Drift
- Clients may experience negative outcomes or be exposed to harmful practices
- Taking spiritual practices out of their context and using them as psychological tools comes at a cost to the practice

# Challenges for Practitioners

- Integrating new knowledge
- Finding support and consultation
- Re-thinking our own points of view and their impact
- Making decisions regarding our integration of and response to new practices