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Getting Serious About Spirituality: Preparing Tomorrow's Counselor for Post-Conventional Faith

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Abstract

This article offers the tools needed for counselor educators to prepare future counselors for clients who express a post-conventional faith identity. Post-conventional faith is defined as an emerging and/or blended religious and spiritual identity that defies the classically neat categorization of contemporary religious and spiritual identity labels. Data on the landscape of religious and spiritual identity is presented to give a picture of the diversification of religion and spirituality in the United States. A case example of an institution which promotes post-conventional faith development in its members is explored. Two theoretical models are presented which can aid counselor educators in helping their students understand the development of post-conventional faith identities. Lastly, in-class training recommendations are provided which can promote students' achievement of comfort and competence in working with clients who express post-conventional faith identities.
Keywords: counselor education, religion, spirituality, post-conventional faith

In 2008, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's survey on the landscape of religion in the United States showed a drastic change in the way people relate to religion and spirituality. Those who identified as Unaffiliated reached 16.1% of the population. The Unaffiliated category was comprised of the following labels: Atheist (1.6%), Agnostic (2.4%), Secular unaffiliated (6.3%), and Religious unaffiliated (5.8%). This data showed a crack in the United States of America's identity as the most religious country in the world. Since 2008 the percentage has steadily risen, reaching 19.6% Unaffiliated in 2012 (Lipka, 2013). Counseling students might expect that over time they will be able to leave their religious and spiritual issues in a counseling textbook on their shelves to collect dust, perhaps taking it down for the occasional religious or spiritually

minded client. However, this premature conclusion is countered by further conclusions of the Pew survey.

Approximately 70% of those surveyed who identified as Unaffiliated still demonstrated some degree of belief in God, Higher Power, or Divine presence (Pew Forum, 2008). Furthermore, there was an increased level of diversity within every category of religion. Guided by this empirical data, it becomes evident that counseling students will encounter more and more clients who do not fit neatly into conventional religious categories. The changing structure of faith identity could very well be in response to the change of individual and family development as laid out by Schweitzer (2004). Due to increased globalization, life expectancy, and information-age connectivity, there is more room for faith exploration as individuals are getting married later, having smaller families, and feeling less committed to any one particular faith community. While single religious communities once filled a gap for individuals and families seeking meaning and support in their life, in today's postmodern life cycle, people are not seeing themselves represented in any one particular framework.

In this article, the term "post-conventional faith" will be used to refer to emerging and blended religious and spiritual identities that defy the classically neat categorization of Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, for example. This article will provide counselor educators with the tools to prepare tomorrow's counselors for the evolving landscape of religion and spirituality. After defining religion and spirituality, an example of post-conventional faith is provided, followed by two models that can be used to help counseling students understand post-conventional faith. The article will conclude with recommendations to increase the trainees' comfort and competence in counseling clients with post-conventional faith identities.

Definitions

Before moving on, it is important to define the nuanced relationship between religion and spirituality, as both concepts require separate though related awareness on the part of a counselor. A classic distinction was contributed by Richards and Bergin (1997),

> We view religious as a subset of the spiritual. Religious has to do with theistic beliefs, practices, and feelings that are often, but not always, expressed institutionally and denominationally as well as personally… Spiritual experiences tend to be universal, ecumenical, internal, affective, spontaneous, and private. (p.13)

When teaching about this distinction to his counseling students, this author will project an image of a framed photograph that is growing out of its frame. For example, a picture of a flower that emerges beyond the border of its picture frame. The frame represents the necessary religious rules and dogmatic boundaries that provide the structure for expressing one's religious and/or spiritual identity. The subject of the picture (i.e., the flower growing out of its frame) is symbolic of the spiritual and gives purpose to the frame. However, in its transcendence of the frame the subject of the picture also represents the function of spirituality which might lead an individual to explore beyond the defined rules.

The challenge and goal of the counselor educator is to present spirituality and religion as complimentary, rather than two concepts that are at odds with each other. Aten and Leach (2009) warned against polarizing the two terms, where religion can be seen as negative, while spirituality has only a positive connotation. If counselors foster a bias towards spirituality as beneficial and religion as outdated, for example, they may potentially limit a full exploration of faith. In truth, both religion and spirituality have been associated with mental health struggle (Wortmann, Park, & Edmondson, 2011).

Post-conventional faith may be seen in James Fowler's Stages of Faith Development as an individual moves from an acceptance of a socially prescribed faith framework to a complex resolution of a conflict between an individual's experience of the world and the previously accepted faith (Parker, 2011). Spiritual struggle can be seen as a factor which causes a person to move beyond conventional boundaries in faith (Ano & Pargament, 2013). Spiritual struggle is a complex experience that arises when stressful life conditions are not comforted by an individual's orienting system towards one's faith. For example, if a person has an ambivalent insecure attachment to God, Ano and Pargament's (2013) research showed that a stressful life situation will more easily result in spiritual struggle. We will explore in greater detail below how spiritual struggle can lead a person towards post-conventional faith.

Post-conventional faith calls for new communities to form; thus, there is a larger social impact at play. Holt, Schulz, Williams, Clark, and Wang (2014) explored the role of religion as an important factor of social support in a sample of African Americans. Their results showed that social support does mediate between religious involvement and decreased feelings of depression. It can be proposed that until a community is found that supports and nurtures an individual's post-conventional faith, the person may be left ruminating in spiritual struggle. Following is an example of an organizational expression of post-conventional faith. While this example can be used to educate counseling students, it is important to emphasize that it is the allowance of diversity and fluidity within the group that speaks more to post-conventional faith than the group itself.

Example of Post-Conventional Faith

Through personal and professional connections, this author became familiar with a Jewishly rooted organization called Kohenet (www.kohenet.org). In Hebrew, the word *kohenet* means priestess, and since 2007 the main program of Kohenet is to train and ordain Hebrew Priestesses. The mission statement of Kohenet, from their Web site, reads, "Revitalizing the Jewish connection with the Divine feminine and reclaiming the ancient role of women as facilitators of sacred experience." This statement is in stark contrast to the traditional image of the Jewish God as characteristically masculine and the traditional male-dominated leadership of the Jewish community. Kohenet's *Who We Are* page on their Web site provides further insight into their post-conventional faith expression:

> This movement includes shamans, kabbalists, wilderness Jews, environmentalist Jews, priestesses of Shekhinah, Jewitches, practitioners of Israeli nature spirituality, and many others. This earth-honoring Jewish movement is one element of a larger circle of earth-based practitioners in many lands and cultures … Kohenet women are a vibrant and diverse group of women committed to deepening their connection to the divine

> feminine through an earth-honoring Jewish path and to embodying this work in their leadership and service work … Some of us observe Judaism in traditional ways while exploring and experiencing our connection to the feminine Divine. Some of us practice or have practiced shamanic, magical, or pagan spirituality, and are now exploring spiritual life in a Jewish context. Some of us focus on deity, while others give primacy to nature, or to community. Some of us pray to Goddess, others to both male and female faces of deity. Some of us do not pray at all, preferring meditation and reflection as our spirit-path.

As stated above, Kohenet is a Jewishly-rooted organization, but they in no way fit into, or intend to fit into, a conventional Jewish framework. Their inclusion of Goddess spirituality, "Jewitchcraft," and paganism can be seen as directly opposed to traditional Jewish beliefs and practices. The founders of Kohenet and cohorts of Hebrew Priestesses challenge these conventional assumptions and make space for their religious and spiritual paradigm in part by using the same tools of hermeneutics and creative interpretation that allows the conventional Jewish perspective to be redefined from generation to generation (e.g., see *Sisters at Sinai* by Hammer, 2001). Their work is making space for the voice of Jewish women to be heard in new ways and is drastically challenging the classic boundaries of Judaism in general. Kohenet has stepped far past convention and serves as an example of a movement that is inspiring post-conventional faith.

Theoretical Models to Frame Post-Conventional Faith

In order to help counseling students understand post-conventional faith from a theoretical perspective, this author suggests teaching the two models presented below. The Meaning Making model (Park & Folkman, 1997) and The Search for the Sacred model (Pargament & Krumrei, 2009) have both been used to explain the nature of growth in the face of spiritual struggle (Ano & Pargament, 2013). The first takes on a meaning perspective, while the second deals directly with language of the sacred.

The Meaning-Making Model

Post-conventional faith can be explained in terms of meaning, as religion and spirituality are ultimately meta-meaning frameworks in which people orient their lives and provide a sense of cohesion (Silberman, 2005). The Meaning-Making model presented by Park and Folkman (1997) deals with two levels of meaning: global and situational. Global meaning is the comprehensive meaning framework held by an individual that is comprised of one's beliefs and values about the way things are and how they ought to be. For example, a traditionally religious Catholic believes in God's eternal goodness and that everything happens for a reason.

Situational meaning, on the other hand, is the appraised meaning that is ascribed to a situation that one encounters in life. The meaning of a situation is appraised from the perspective of one's global meaning. The Catholic believer encountering serious illness, for example, might be challenged in his or her belief in God's ultimate goodness. From this conflict between global and situational meaning, meaning making can arise in at least two ways. The believer might re-appraise the situation so it can be better assimilated into the global meaning framework. Thus, illness becomes a test that brings a person to a

deeper level of faith. God remains good and in control. Alternatively, one's global meaning can be altered in order to accommodate the appraised meaning of a situation. In our example, the Catholic believer might consider that not everything happens for a reason and God can ultimately be found in the community support that brings comfort and nurturing. Both meaning making alternatives can be seen as spiritual coping and growth (Park, 2013).

The Meaning-Making Model can be used to help counseling students understand the narratives from which a post-conventional faith identity emerges. Most clients and the students themselves are born into some faith tradition (global meaning) that becomes a source of struggle (situational meaning) at different times in one's life. Returning to the Pew (2008) data, we learn that 44% of people living in the United States of America have changed their faith identity over time. One might imagine the variety of possible life narratives that would result in someone displaying a bumper sticker that proclaims, "Jesus was the first JewBu," or finding a spiritual home in an organization like Kohenet. Similarly, the Meaning-Making model can help make sense of the high percentage of people who believe in some form of Higher Power though remain Unaffiliated in their religious identify. We turn to the second model, which directly engages the concept of the sacred.

The Search for Sacred Model

Pargament and Krumrei (2009), similarly described a dynamic model that can be shared with students in order to help them grasp the formation of post-conventional faiths. The model is called the Search for the Sacred, where sacred is defined as, "any aspect of life that takes on attributes of divinity. Thus, the sacred can encompass relationships, nature, art, institutions, the self, sports, war, politics, time, place, sexuality, and so on, if it is imbued with divine character and significance (p. 94)." In this model, a person first encounters something sacred through a social or personal experience. For example, an individual is born into an Orthodox Jewish family and is raised to conceptualize the sacred through the lens of Orthodox Judaism. Once established, a person will go to great lengths to conserve his or her relationship with the sacred. Thus, an Orthodox Jewish man will most likely, at first, deny any homosexual desires that might arise, since according to the Orthodox Jewish interpretation of the bible, homosexuality is abhorrent (Halbertal & Koren, 2006).

At some point, one's relationship to the sacred is challenged by internal or external changes. His attraction for men, to continue our example, becomes so strong that he can no longer pray with his community without becoming aroused. These spiritual struggles challenge the relationship with the sacred so fiercely that conservation is no longer possible. The individual may now experience an interruption in one's search for the sacred, for example, disavowing the Orthodox Jewish conception of God completely, and/or propelling the individual to seek out the sacred in a new way, perhaps by embracing a more personal experience of the Divine that embraces the spiritual potential in a homosexual orientation.

This Search for the Sacred model can be applied to the spiritual journeys of clients and students alike who have transcended conventional faith identities in favor of more nuanced and complex sacred expressions. This author finds that presenting this model along with the Meaning-Making model of Park and Folkman (1997) provides

counseling students with a more than adequate theoretical base to comprehend and explore the faith traditions of any client. The final section of this article will turn to experiential exercises that can be duplicated by counselor educators to expand their students' awareness of post-conventional faith, while also enabling students to explore their own beliefs and biases.

Training Recommendations for Counselor Education

Worthington et al. (2009) make the case that when training counselors in religious and spiritual issues, curriculum should be focused on awareness and expansion of the student's "zone of toleration" (p.270). Accomplishing this goal results in both achieved comfort and competence when working with religious and spiritual clients. As we have seen from the Pew Forum's (2008) data presented above, clients need not identify as religious or spiritual to grapple with issues of religion and spirituality. Thus, achieving comfort and competence in addressing post-conventional faith can prepare counseling students for working with a larger percentage of their potential client base.

An important step in training counselors is to help them become aware of the potential biases that exist when they encounter religious and spiritual language. An exercise to uncover these biases, utilized by this author, is to prepare several power point slides each of which contains a single word or phrase that is associated with religion and spirituality. For example, separate slides might contain the following words in large, bold letters: God, Divine Mother, Blood and Body of Christ, and Pagan. Students are instructed to attend to the physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts that arise as they are shown each new word or phrase. After each word or phrase is displayed, students are asked to share what they are experiencing. Trainees can witness their own automatic internal responses to a variety of religious and spiritual language and they can see how their peers might react in different or similar ways. At the conclusion of the exercise, participants can reflect on how their reactions might have surprised them, or what insights arise knowing that their peers experienced different internal responses.

From here, counselor educators can facilitate an exercise whereby students expand on their own religious and spiritual identities, values, and beliefs – increasing the sense of religious and spiritual diversity that exists within and between individuals. The following exercise was shared by Roberts (2009), called, "On the Line: Voices and Views" (p. 365-367). In this activity, students are asked to clear a space in the middle of the classroom stretching from one end of the room to the other. One end of the "line" across the classroom is designated as 'highly agree,' while the other end of the line is designated as 'highly disagree.' The instructor projects multiple power point slides, one at a time, each containing a different phrase that shares an opinion held about religion and spirituality. For example, this author used the following statements, among others, with his class: "Everyone should be able to find their unique blend of religion – the more choices the better," "Everyone is spiritual, even if they identify as agnostic or atheist – even if they choose not to express their spirituality," and, "I believe that there is a force of goodness in the world and that everything happens for a reason."

As each statement appears, participants stand on the line in the place that symbolizes their degree of agreement to disagreement with that particular statement. Students can be asked to turn to someone standing near them to talk about why they

chose this position. Next, they may find someone standing elsewhere on the line and discuss why their positions differed. Alternatively, a selection of students along the line's continuum can share out loud why they took their current position. The goals of these exercises are to tune students into their own religious and spiritual beliefs, expose them to a variety of religious and spiritual beliefs, and learn how to manage their expectations and reactions to an endless array of faith identities that exist outside of themselves.

Exploring Post-Conventional Faith with Clients

Pargament and Krumrei (2009) provided an extensive overview for conducting an assessment of a client's spirituality. They reviewed a number of instruments that can be used for such assessment and also shared more comprehensive frameworks for capturing a client's faith perspective. A foundational element that speaks to the heart of post-conventional faith exploration is given in a section that invites the counselor to see a faith perspective as a narrative that a client may share. It is the counselor's responsibility to let the client know, through implicit and explicit means, that one's spiritual and religious story is fully welcome (Pargament & Krumrei, 2009). By viewing faith identity as a journey, the counselor can stay open and attuned to the shifting nuances of a post-conventional faith identity. Also, the counselor can remember that just as a narrative continues to change and find new meaning in its interpretations, so too post-conventional faith is best understood as a work in progress.

Conclusion

This article explored the concept of post-conventional faith and provided reasons why it is important for counselor educators to teach future counselors about this concept. The landscape of religion and spirituality in the United States of America is further diversifying each year and counselors will not be able to rely on conventional labels to grasp clients' faith identities. We looked at Kohenet as an example of post-conventional faith that can be shared with students and two theoretical models that can help students understand how post-conventional faith develops. The models span from a meaning perspective to a perspective that addresses the sacred directly. Lastly, this author shared two training recommendations that he uses with counseling students to help them achieve greater comfort and competence in dealing with post-conventional faith and provided a framing for exploring post-conventional faith with clients.

Further study in understanding post-conventional faith is warranted. Future research might focus on grasping the transition of individuals from conventional to post-conventional faith. Empirical studies can be organized to look at the differences between conventional and post-conventional faith as they relate to measures of well being. Lastly, research can look deeper into how post-conventional faith is changing society with the creation of new models of shared faith expression.

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