

Religion and Spirituality: A Necessary Distinction?

Professor Patricia Casey

Introduction

There is increasing interest within psychiatry on the role of religion and spirituality in mental health. Perusing the studies, it is striking that, with very few exceptions, they focus on spirituality and religion combined. Studies examining either religion or spirituality are rare. Yet for those interested in this area, it is surely important to ascertain which aspects of mental health and illness these might respectively impinge upon.

The relationship between spirituality and religion

One of the reasons for the failure to examine these attributes separately is because the conceptualisation of spirituality and religion. For centuries, spirituality was seen as central to, and part of, religiousness. Those who were spiritual were seen as especially devout and engaging in practices that not only included church attendance and prayer but also contemplative exercises such as meditation, fasting, study of sacred texts and eremitic monastic practices. Gradually this balance changed and spirituality superseded religiousness as a more widely embracing domain. Nevertheless spirituality was still focused on the supernatural, that may have included a personal God or if not, then on a power greater than oneself.

With the reaction against institutional religion in the 1960's alongside the growth in secularism, the concept of spirituality began to encompass those who were secular and for whom spirituality did not relate to any concept of the Divine or of the supernatural. A further development in how spirituality was regarded was the inclusion of feelings of happiness, well-being and optimism as indicative of spirituality.

If psychiatrists have an interest in the specific question 'do religiousness or spirituality influence psychological well-being and if so in what domains of behaviour, symptoms or functioning?', then the developments outlined above will prevent us answering this for the following reasons:

- if spirituality is universal then we cannot answer questions about the value or otherwise of religion and/or of spirituality since we have no population of non-religious-non-spiritual people with whom to make the comparisons.

- if we regard features such as optimism and joy (themselves measures of psychological well-being) as indicative of spirituality then we will always find a close correlation between spirituality and psychological well-being since, in essence, we will be comparing one psychological measure with another overlapping measure. This has been termed the tautological argument (Koenig 2008).
- if we combine religion and spirituality into one measure, as has been the practice in most research in this area, we will be unable to separate the benefits or problems attaching to each or to the domains of life that they may influence, be it emotional wellbeing, suicidality, interpersonal relationships, substance use and so on.

Defining the groups

If we separate the religious, spiritual and secular groups from each other then a number of distinct categories become apparent, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Classification of spiritual, religious and secular persons

1. Spiritual and religious – this classification represent the traditional view of the relationship of one to the other.
2. Spiritual but not religious – this is the newest group.
3. Neither religious nor spiritual – atheists and agnostics would generally regard themselves as belonging to this category.
4. Religious but not spiritual – this group has not received little or no attention but might represent the group whom Pargament (1997) would consider to have an extrinsic form of religion.

If research into spirituality and religion are to be combined, it is important to confirm that these are not overlapping categories. While the 1st and 3rd above are clearly identifiable and the 4th in all probability is rare, the second group is relatively common, yet little is known about their defining characteristics (this will be considered below). A further complexity is the fact that group 3, those who are neither religious nor spiritual, may become extinct if the definition of spirituality becomes so broad as to exclude considerations of the supernatural while extending it to incorporate personal beliefs or feelings such as inner peace, wellbeing etc., since these are themselves measures of psychological wellbeing.

In one study (King et al. 2006) 17.7% identified themselves as neither religious nor spiritual, leading to the conclusion that this is indeed a distinct group. They

should form an important comparison group against which to compare the benefits or harm of religiousness or spirituality.

'I'm spiritual but not religious'

Many people, when asked, now state that they are spiritual but not religious. What do they mean? This group was identified by Roof (2001) as emerging from the baby boom generation. Born to post-war parents, they spawned the social revolution of the 1960's and shifted the focus away from the institution of religion to the 'search' of the individual, defining their own gods. One study (Zimmbauer et al. 1997) shows this group tend to view religiousness in a negative light and are less likely to engage in traditional forms of worship as compared to those who describe themselves as religious. They are, however, more likely to be more independent of others, to hold 'New Age' beliefs and to have mystical experiences. They also view spirituality and religion as non-overlapping constructs. The relatively large minority (31.1%) who self-defined as religious but not spiritual in one study (King et al. 2006) further demonstrates the importance of considering this group separately from the religious group in future studies of spirituality and religiousness.

Definitions of spirituality

Having considered the self-defined distinction between religion and spirituality, the next question is what do we mean by spirituality? Is spirituality sufficiently clearly defined to allow for its scientific study? Secondly, do the tools that measure spirituality distinguish spirituality sufficiently clearly from psychological well being? Both are related questions – the first seeking to avoid nebulous definitions that include everybody within the bounds of spirituality and the second seeking to avoid equating spirituality with emotional wellbeing. A fault line that separates spirituality from these other attributes is necessary if meaningful research is to continue.

Numerous definitions of spirituality are available. One is that 'spirituality is universal, yet unique to every person... (it) enables and motivates us to search for meaning and purpose in life. It is the spirit which synthesises the total personality and provides some sort of energising direction and order. The spiritual dimension does not exist in isolation from the psyche and the soma. It affects and is affected by our physical state, feelings, thoughts and relationships' (Ellison 1983). This is a very broad definition that seems to have no parameters.

A further, similar definition provided by the World Health Organisation is also equally broad. The World Health Organisation Spirituality, Religion and Personal Beliefs questionnaire (WHOQOL-SRPB) measures eight dimensions listed as follows:

- Spiritual Connection
- Meaning and purpose in life
- Experiences of awe and wonder
- Wholeness and integration
- Spiritual strength
- Inner peace
- Hope and optimism
- Faith

From this list it is apparent that many are measures which overlap with psychological well-being. A further problem with this schedule is that in the instructions the authors state 'the following questions ask about your spiritual, personal or religious beliefs. These questions are designed to be applicable to people coming from many different cultures and holding a variety of spiritual, religious or personal beliefs... Alternatively you may have no belief in a higher, spiritual entity but you may have strong personal beliefs or followings, such as beliefs in a scientific theory, a personal way of life.... While some of these questions will use words such as spirituality, please answer them in terms of your own personal belief system, whether it be religious, spiritual or personal'. These instructions suggest that a personal belief system in, for example anarchy, or in the scientific theory of gravity, would be incorporated within this measure and regarded as indicating spirituality.

Utilising this questionnaire to evaluate the impact of spirituality/ religion/personal beliefs on quality of life in eighteen countries with a sample size of 5,089 subjects, the authors found that this measure explained 65% of the variance in the regression analysis (Saxena 2006). On the face of it this might seem a very positive outcome but when examined more critically it is no more than proof that broad measures which overlap find high levels of association with related broad measures. Moreover, while claiming to examine religion and spirituality is in fact extending these attributes to include lifestyle choices. The results are therefore of little assistance in answering specific questions about religion and spirituality.

Indeed, many of the spirituality questionnaires in common use have a similar tautological problem making interpretation of the findings of a high association between spirituality and psychological well-being difficult to interpret. Readers are referred to Koenig (2006) for further information on these.

One approach that has been recommended by Hill et al. (2000) is empirically to ground any definition of spirituality in a 'sacred core', incorporating a search for meaning with the term 'sacred', referring to a divine being or divine object, ultimate reality or ultimate truth as perceived by the individual. Some (LaPierre 1994) emphasise an encounter with transcendence, a search for the ultimate truth or highest value, respect for the mystery of creation while others (King and Koenig 2009) define it as a conviction about a domain or existence that goes

beyond the material world, and that includes all manner of religious or other beliefs not based on materialism.

Which measures?

Considering the flaws outlined above, it is crucial to choose measures that

- separate spirituality from religiousness
- clearly define each so that their parameters do not overlap
- that are distinct from possible outcome measures of interest such as psychological well being, quality of life etc.

The measure of religiousness that is the most simple to use and which has been validated and meets the criteria delineated above is that by Koenig et al. (1997). This is a five-item measure for use in health outcome studies (known as the Duke University Religion Index – DUREL) consisting of five questions. The first relates to church attendance or other religious meetings, the second to private religious activity such prayer, meditation, bible study and the final three to the impact of these on one's life and approach to life.

A measure of spirituality/religiousness with clear definitions of the various groups (religious, spiritual but not religious etc) was developed by King et al. (2001). The questions are not contaminated by any measure psychological well-being and the focus is clearly on the supernatural or on powers greater than oneself.

For a comprehensive list of tools to measure religion and spirituality the reader is directed to Koenig (2001).

Do religion or spirituality have differential effects on psychological well-being?

Very little research has been carried out on these two domains separately since virtually all studies have combined religion and spirituality. The present comments are, therefore, tentative. Some recent studies have suggested that religious practice as distinct from spirituality may confer some psychological benefit. King et al. (2006) examined six ethnic groups in Britain. Comparing the religious spiritual group combined with who are neither, no difference in the prevalence of common mental disorders (CMDs) was found. However, when the spiritual group who did not practice religion were compared with those who did practice religion CMDs were more common in the former (OR 2.01, CI 1.15 - 3.51). A more recent study on suicidal behaviour (Rasic et al. 2009) found that in relation to self-harm this behaviour was lower in a group who identified as religious in comparison to those who identified as spiritual after controlling for social supports (OR 0.38, CI 0.17-0.89). Further studies are clearly necessary to explore this important question.

Conclusions and recommendations

Religion and spirituality may have different effects on psychological well-being or quality of life and should be evaluated separately. Moreover, due to problems with the breadth and circular nature of the current measures of spirituality, there is a strong case for delimiting spirituality so that measures of psychological wellbeing are not included, for separating the religious group from those who are spiritual and within the latter clearly defining and operationalising the term. This would allow for a group, already self-identified in some studies, as neither spiritual nor religious to be distinguished from other groups who are spiritual but not religious and who are religious.

Such an approach could generate fascinating studies that would focus on questions concerning the benefits and/or problems attaching to religion or spirituality that at present remain largely unexplored.

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