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The Emerging Role of Spirituality

Aging Today is pleased to offer this second column in a four-column series that hopes to shed fresh light on the various timely topics focusing on religion, spirituality and aging.

By **JAMES W. ELLOR**

The term *spirituality* is possibly one of the most confusing to arise within the gerontology field during the 20th century. In contrast with the term religion, spirituality seems to imply something more personal, whereas religion implies denominations, congregations and possibly dogmas. If spirituality, by definition, is personal, its definitions are as numerous as the people who use this term.

In the 1986 anthology, *The Study of Spirituality*, editors Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold note that “the word *spirituality* is recent in its meaning.” Older meanings can be traced back to the 1500s and 1600s, and are generally associated with mystical or ascetic theology. The book states that the more traditional use of the term within the Christian tradition can be separated into “the clerical-priestly tradition and the lay-popularist tradition.” The latter term, more private and more local, has a connection with many of Catholicism’s mystical traditions and “its roots lie in the personal experience of spiritual realities and in mystical contemplation of the natural world and God.” The clerical tradition, more sacramental and biblical, speaks to a more communal dimension of spirituality.

NEW TERMS, NEW TRENDS

The term spirituality entered the gerontology literature through the 1971 White House Conference on Aging, which introduced the term *spiritual wellbeing*. In 1980, James Thorson and Thomas Cook of The National Interfaith Coalition on Aging stated that “spiritual wellbeing is the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community, and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness.”

This definition presents challenges for quantitative/qualitative research. Reviews of the literature suggest that between 1970 and 1990, researchers predominantly moved away from the term *religion* and used *spiritual wellbeing*, then finally, *spirituality*. Prior to 1970, most people would speak of religion, but few would have talked about spirituality or their spiritual needs.

In a recent study of American Society on Aging and National Council on Aging members, my colleague Susan McFadden and I found that 55% of these gerontology professionals describe themselves as both religious and spiritual; 33% suggest that they are only spiritual and 2.4% say that they are only religious. While these percentages shift slightly between baby boomers and non-baby boomers, the trend is clear. Though there is little agreement as to what *spirituality* means, the term is here to stay.

THE ONGOING SEARCH FOR MEANING

Today, the term *spiritual* has definitions that are grounded in “an inner field of human experience,” writes Robert Atchley in his 2009 book, *Spirituality and Aging*. This current usage has taken on a new interpretation that might bridge denominations and religion and allow for a compromise between potentially divisive sub-groupings. The term *religion* often implies meaning to only a single subgroup or denomination of religious persons.

To speak of the spiritual is to point to a shared, personal meaning. As such, the term spiritual seems to be morphing in two ways: One group employs the traditional lay-popularist approach, implying that spirituality is tied somehow to that which is greater than we are. A second group suggests that there is an understanding of spirituality which is personal for the individual, yet identified as commonplace within the person—at least within the North American culture.

Though not clearly defined, most definitions of the term *spiritual* suggest that it is both transcendent and meaningful. It is unclear whether these definitions truly tie into the lay-popularist definitions, which involve something greater than the person (usually a divine being) or if they are pseudonyms for the study of meaning.

A PUZZLING DUALITY

Spirituality, in its new interpretation, seems to be shaped around personal expression. This personal or private expression allows the duality of intrinsic versus extrinsic religion, but can be contradictory to some basic assumptions of religious life. Rabbi Dayle Friedman, of Philadelphia’s Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, notes that “the bias in Jewish life has traditionally been toward communal religious expression. You cannot say certain central prayers of the liturgy of prayers recited three times a day without a *minyán*, a quorum of 10 adult Jews.”

But the weight of Jewish piety, as Allen Glicksman writes in a recent 2009 issue of the *Journal of Religion, Spirituality and Aging*, is on shared, communal religious experience and observance.”

For Christians, the term spirituality seems to be developing in the context of what religious scholar Martin Marty identified many years ago as the “private Protestantism” of the American people. Reverend Don Koepke, of the CLH Center for Spirituality and Aging in Cerritos, Calif., notes that his mother refers to spirituality as “my heart faith.” People often say that they are spiritual, but do not follow a religious tradition. This may imply their spiritual connection to that which is greater than they are, but does not mean they attend a church, synagogue, temple or mosque. Implied is a personal and meaningful sense of connection.

A NEW SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE

My colleagues Melissa Ishio and Susan McFadden collaborated with me on two separate studies—one in 2008 through Baylor University and another in 2010 on behalf of the American Society on Aging—in which participants were asked if they thought their religious congregation would be supportive in their older age—especially if they had dementia. The overwhelming response was “no.” Many believed that their congregation did not know *how* to be supportive.

There are many voices in this new interpretation of spirituality, and there should be. Some join the ancient voices to embrace a spiritual mysticism that is refreshing in our scientific age. Some follow a more cognate search for meaning. These two practices are not always mutually exclusive, but probably occur more on a continuum. If this phenomenon continues, it may dramatically change the landscape of religious and spiritual programs and services for the aging. ❖

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