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Sex-Positive Spirituality: Integrating Spirituality and Sexuality Into Therapy
Spiritualité sexuellement positive : intégrer la spiritualité et la sexualité au cœur de la thérapie

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, the authors explore the challenges and the opportunities for therapists to help their clients bridge the divide between their religious and spiritual beliefs and their sexual practices and identities. The therapeutic work experiences of both authors are primarily with clients who identify with some expression of the Christian faith, hence the focus of this article. The article emphasizes the importance of therapists collaborating holistically with clients who identify as spiritual/religious, and while therapists having prior knowledge of spirituality/religion is helpful, it is not necessary. The article concludes that, in order to work effectively with clients who identify as spiritual or religious, therapists must include spirituality/religion in the healing process.

RÉSUMÉ
Dans cet article, les auteurs explorent à la fois les défis et les opportunités pour les thérapeutes d'aider leurs clients à combler le fossé entre leurs croyances religieuses et spirituelles, d'une part, et leurs pratiques et identités sexuelles, d'autre part. Les expériences thérapeutiques des deux auteurs concernent principalement des clients qui s'identifient à une certaine expression de la foi chrétienne, ce qui sera l'objet de cet article. L'article présente l'importance d'une collaboration holistique avec les clients qui s'identifient comme spirituels ou religieux. Les auteurs affirment qu'il est utile, sans être nécessaire, de détenir des connaissances en matière de spiritualité ou de religion. La conclusion des auteurs est que les thérapeutes doivent se concentrer sur la thérapie lorsqu'ils travaillent avec des clients spirituels ou religieux. Pour y parvenir efficacement, les thérapeutes doivent inclure la spiritualité ou la religion dans le processus de guérison.

There are challenges facing therapists in their attempts to assist their clients. Effective work with clients for whom spirituality/religion is of crucial importance is one such challenge in counselling. To explore this approach to therapy further, this article begins with an overview of spirituality/religion and includes insights found in holistic counselling principles informing best practices with spiritual/religious clients. The focus of the article is on work with clients who identify within one of the many forms of Christianity. The general impact of churches' beliefs related to the body have led to problematic ideas related to sexuality (Davidson, 1989; Pagels, 1988). Given these influences, it is important for therapists to know what might be helpful for clients who claim they have been harmed by these influences. The article will end with general ideas for therapists related to alternative holistic principles for Christian clients.

Although the percentage of Canadians who claim to have a religious affiliation has been declining over the past decades, at least 55% of Canadians continue to identify themselves as Christian according to the latest data from the 2021 census (Statistics Canada, 2022). Furthermore, those who claim to have no religious affiliation frequently express that they are "spiritual" even while not aligning with a religious identification such as Christian, Muslim, or Hindu. This means that potentially more than half of the clients who enter our clinical spaces identify as either religious or spiritual or a combination of both. Numerous sources have shown that spirituality and religiosity often contribute positively to relational challenges, addiction recovery, and mental health issues (Plante & Pardini, 2000). People in the helping professions in Canada need to be able to work with a variety of people, including those who identify as spiritual/religious, whatever expressions or forms this may take (Hull et al., 2016; W. James, 1902/1978; King & Franke, 2017; Kvarfordt et al., 2017; Smith, 2020).

The key terms used in this article are *spirituality/religion* and *spiritual/religious positive sexuality*. A review of the literature demonstrates that there are challenges in understanding what spirituality and religion mean and how these terms relate to each other. Some academics suggest that spirituality and religion are both distinct and interrelated terms (Stratton, 2015; Mutter & Neves, 2010; Post & Wade, 2014; Wong & Vinsky, 2009). "Spirituality and religion are not mutually exclusive" (Fallon et al., 2013, p. 39). Others describe these terms as as not mutually exclusive (Garfield et al., 2013; Unterrainer et al., 2010). Spirituality/religion are "overlapping constructs … [and] central to the experience of both religion and spirituality is a search for the sacred; 'sacred' being defined as a divine being, divine object, Ultimate Reality, or Ultimate Truth" (Ivtzan et al., 2013, p. 917). As authors, we define religion as a search for the spiritual that is validated by community. Further to this point, we note that in spirituality there is a search for the sacred, but it can be with or without a religious community.

Sex-positive spirituality/religion is a phrase used in this paper to communicate the healthy integration of clients' sexuality with their spiritual/religious identities.

This phrase is rooted in the larger ideas found in sex-positive counselling (Mosher, 2017). Baggett and colleagues (2017, p. 967) noted that "sex-positive refers to an approach that views sexuality, including sexual pleasure, as a normative and essential part of human behavior and wellness." They added that sex-positive therapeutic approaches address the "client's personal meaning of their sexuality" as it relates to "well-being." It is important to recognize that sexuality is part of what is considered in the meaning-making process for people (Kimmes et al., 2015) and that meaning making is often part of how people define spirituality/religion (Kashdan & Nezlek, 2012; Hill et al., 2000).

There is a growing body of literature supporting the inclusion of spirituality/religion as integral to holistic therapeutic counselling approaches (Augustyn et al., 2017; Baskin, 2016; Canda & Furman, 2010; Dixon & Arthur, 2019; A. James & Wells, 2003). In clinical work, clients (Koenig, 2008) decide what spirituality/religion means to them. Therapists need to work respectfully with whatever clients mean by spirituality/religion. We would go further by promoting the celebration of diversity evidenced in part by a "wide acceptance of spirituality in all its expressions" (Gardner, 2016, p. 183). Although therapists might assume negative impact, spiritual/religious experience can include an openness to the larger world, including other ways people believe and practise (Saleebey, 2013). Spirituality/religion can contribute to clients' well-being (Augustyn et al., 2017; Bartz, 2009; Davis et al., 2015; Dixon & Arthur, 2019; Fitzgerald & Gladstone, 2008; Jisrawi & Arnold, 2018).

The trend toward the growing acceptance of holistic views including spirituality/religion in Western therapeutic approaches has always been present in Indigenous understandings of well-being. Indigenous scholars note that working holistically includes consideration of the spirit, the heart, the mind, and the body (Absolon, 2016; Robbins & Dewar, 2011). Most Indigenous scholars regard well-being and spirituality/religion as connected with all aspects of a person's life (Cole & Healey, 2013). Including spirituality/religion with clients' sexuality is one aspect of integrated approach in counselling work.

Spirituality/Religion and Holistic Counselling

There are therapists and academics who promote spirituality/religion as a common human experience that needs to be included in holistic counselling (Oxhandler et al., 2015). For example, Unterrainer and colleagues note that their study "provides evidence that religiosity and spirituality may represent important aspects of humanity" (Unterrainer et al., 2010, p. 196). Holistic counselling principles noted in the literature align with this conclusion. A growing body of counselling literature promotes holistic practices with clients that include the emotional, the social, the intellectual, the spiritual, and the physical (Absolon, 2016; Coholic & LeBreton, 2007; Gardner, 2016; Wright et al., 2011). Holistic counselling includes the spiritual/religious and is seen in various practices (Canda & Furman,

2010). For example, "The incorporation of spirituality/religion into psychological end of life care, with a focus on the biopsychosocial-spiritual model of health, and the consideration of spirituality/religion as an aspect of cultural diversity" (Moss & Dobson, 2006, p. 284). There are some associations that promote spiritual/religious considerations when professionals are collaborating with clients in end-of-life care (Zaidi, 2018; American Occupational Therapy Association, 2011). In most helping professions, there is a need for further improvement in the inclusion of spirituality/religion in therapeutic work (Daniels & Fitzpatrick, 2013; Gokani & Smith, 2020; Leighton, 2016).

In A. James and Wells's (2003) review of the literature, they observed that incorporating spirituality/religion into traditional therapy groups produced similar and in some cases better results in terms of improving clients' well-being (see also Augustyn et al., 2017). Similarly, a study examining the incorporation of spirituality with cognitive behavioural therapy showed this approach to be as helpful as groups without spirituality, concluding, in part, that working therapeutically from clients' spiritual perspectives was effective (Pearce & Koenig, 2016). Other authors advocate for arts-based therapy as a way for clients to access spirituality (Coholic & LeBreton, 2007). "Existential wellbeing counseling emphasizes the interdependent nature of physical, social, personal and spiritual aspects of human experience" (Leijssen, 2014, p. 142). The work of enhancing human well-being needs to include spirituality/religion and sexuality.

Therapists should consider that spirituality may be one variable in clients' lives that contributes to well-being (Bartz, 2009; Davis et al., 2015; Fitzgerald & Gladstone, 2008; Maslow, 1999; Mitchell et al., 2012; Sterling et al., 2006; Wade et al., 2014). In the section below, we consider a variety of ways spirituality/religion might be incorporated into counselling.

Counselling Informed by Ideologies/Principles

Acknowledging the importance of spirituality/religion in the lives of clients can result in deeper holistic work (Canda & Furman, 2010; Frederick, 2014; McDonald, 2011; Wright et al., 2011). For example, if someone's sexual orientation and spiritual/religious identity are in conflict, engaging with these issues with a counsellor could be a way toward resolution (Fallon et al., 2013; Ronneberg et al., 2016).

Some therapists choose to collaborate with a religious representative (i.e., clergy) in the work done with spiritual/religious clients (Almeida & Lockard, 2005; Breuninger et al., 2014). Another way to include spirituality/religion is to have clients identify what might be helpful for them in this regard. For example, given that feminism is committed to supporting all aspects of women's experiences, feminist counsellors could work with clients to have them identify what aspects of spirituality/religion might be useful in the healing process (Averett

et al., 2012; Church et al., 2006; Wright, 2009). Spirituality/religion can also directly inform counselling.

There is an "ethical imperative" for counsellors to include spirituality/religion in their work in that there is "clear evidence that spirituality is a vital aspect of an individual's culture and development and, as such, simply cannot be ignored in the counseling process" (Giordano & Cashwell, 2014, p. 65). These authors argue that therapists should include spirituality/religion in their assessments, an idea that is promoted in other counselling research findings (Frederick, 2014; Hull et al., 2016; Oakes & Raphel, 2008). In the use of specific spiritual/religious questions, Oakes and Raphel (2008) suggest that including spirituality/religion in an assessment can help identify "the essential beliefs and values of clients" (p. 41).

It has been our experience that including spirituality/religion in work with clients means discovering what this has meant in the past, what it means in the present, and what it could mean in the future. Past experiences have an impact on clients, some negatively and others positively. Abuse connected with religion, spiritual/religious ideas that produce shame related to sexuality, and/or negative views of sexual orientation are all examples of negative past experiences that need processing in therapy. Other clients may have had positive experiences in the past, where a keen sense of community, a celebration of the body, and/or fuller life meaning could be explored with clients as a way to find out if spiritual/religious practices might be part of clients' healing processes. This also has implications related to possible spiritual/religious resources clients might access in the future to continue their healing. As therapists, we have collaborated with clients who connect with a spiritual/religious community, return to individual practices, and/or seek out specific spiritual/religious resources (workshops, seminars, spiritual direction) as part of their ongoing process toward flourishing.

But one area in which religiosity can become a barrier to well-being is in integrating religious beliefs with sexual practices and identity. This is especially the case for Christians who are on the more conservative end of the theological spectrum. There are both challenges and opportunities for therapists to help their clients bridge the divide between their religious/spiritual beliefs and their sexual practices and identities. There is particular hope in further exploring sex positivity with clients who identify as Christian. While the learnings will be transferable to faiths outside of Christianity, it is important to acknowledge that the authors have the most knowledge of and experience with Christian beliefs. It is our considered opinion that sex-positive attitudes can co-exist with Christian religious and spiritual beliefs. Joining a spiritual/religious framework with sex-positive spirituality can advance the therapeutic alliance between therapists and clients. Sex-positive spirituality empowers clients to compassionately embrace their experiences of sexuality and their spiritual/religious beliefs.

Sex-Negative Attitudes Within Christianity

There is a biblical story from the Old Testament about two brothers named Esau and Jacob. After having betrayed his brother by stealing his birthright, Jacob has a day of reckoning when he is about to see his brother again after years of estrangement. At one point in the story, Jacob sends his wives and his concubines, along with his oxen and his grain, over the river where he will meet his brother the next day, while he stays on the other side. During the night, a stranger comes and begins to wrestle with him. They wrestle all night long with no apparent winner but, as morning breaks, Jacob begins to prevail. Suddenly he realizes that his opponent was an angel sent by God. The angel blesses him but not before cursing him with a wound on his hip that will remind him forever of this encounter (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha*, 1977, Gen. 32:22–32).

This story provides a good analogy for the complex relationship that the Christian church has developed with the beautiful entity of human sexuality. Within Christian theologies/traditions, many ideas about sex can be found. Some of these ideas hold that sexuality is a curse, while others identify it as a blessing. These negative and positive views have wrestled with one another for centuries. Unfortunately, most have felt the pain of the wound rather than the blessing. The Christian Bible is composed of both the New Testament, which contains stories of the life of Jesus and the establishment of the early church, and the Hebrew Scriptures, which many Christians refer to as the Old Testament and which contain the stories of the Jewish faith (van Aarde, 2012). The wide continuum of "harsh" and "generous" texts within the Bible that are related to so much of life, including sexuality, makes it necessary for believers today both to acknowledge these mixed messages and to interpret them humanly (Sacks, 2002, p. 207). Throughout the Christian Bible, there are scriptures that celebrate human sexuality as well as scriptures that can portray sex in negative ways. This has established a firm wedge between Christian spirituality and human sexuality.

In the Old Testament, the book called the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon is full of scripture references that celebrate heterosexual human sexuality (Davidson, 1989). The Song of Songs is about two lovers who "drink wine," which refers to making love. The beauty of sexual love is represented throughout this text in the fertility symbols of vineyards, pomegranates, and mandrakes ("every delicacy"; *The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha*, 1977, Sg 7:13; M. V. Fox, 1985; White, 1978). The young woman requests refreshment with foods the ancients believed possessed powers to restore and enhance romantic energies and capabilities including raisins, apples, raisin cakes, pomegranates, and spiced wine, as seen in Song of Songs 2:5, 4:13, and 7:8, 12–13 (Trible, 1978). Referring to the erotic poetry demonstrated through the dialogue of these lovers in this biblical text, Phyllis Trible states that "the voices of the Song of Songs extol and enhance the creation of sexuality" (1978, p. 145).

There are other books of the Old Testament that speak to the power of human sexuality. In the Book of Ruth, a woman whose husband has died and who is counselled by her mother-in-law, Naomi, goes at night and uncovers the feet of a man who can re-establish the financial and social position of both women. The phrase "uncover the feet is widely understood by biblical scholars as code for 'uncovering the genitals'" (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha*, 1977, p. 72). As is the case for all historical books, but most especially for those tied to religious traditions, when certain individuals are given *interpretation privilege*, a dominant theology emerges that can influence believers and non-believers for decades, if not centuries.

The person who cemented the chasm between Christian spirituality and human sexuality most effectively was the 5th-century theologian Augustine (Rondet, 1972; Tennant, 1903/1968). As a young man, Augustine lived openly with a concubine who gave him a son, but upon his conversion, he became particularly obsessed with his own sexuality. In his writings, he described himself as a slave to his sexual impulses. Throughout the *Confessions*, the language he uses to describe his sexual impulses is of disease, disorder, and corruption. He talks about desire as mud (Augustine, 1992, 2.2, 3.1), a whirlpool (2.2), chains (2.2, 3.1), thorns (2.3), a seething cauldron (3.1), and an open sore that needs scratching (3.1). For Augustine, desire was an evil impulse that he felt incapable of controlling without God's help, a bondage from which he was too weak to escape. His writings have influenced numerous Christian traditions including Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.

One obvious way that Augustine's theology continues to permeate the dominant understanding of Christianity is through the cultural acceptance of the doctrine of the fall (Rondet, 1972). The fall is the theological nomenclature given to Augustine's interpretation of the second creation story in Genesis. The basic premise is that Eve tempted Adam with her sexuality and convinced him to eat the fruit of the one tree God told them was forbidden (Higgins, 1976). This led to both Eve and Adam being expelled from the garden and forced to live in a world of good and evil rather than the nirvana of Eden, which was only good. There were, and continue to be, other sex-positive and creation-centred theological interpretations of this second Genesis story but, sadly, Augustine's theology dominated thinking within the Church for centuries, casting a dark shadow over any positive relationship between sexuality and Christian spirituality (M. Fox, 1983/2020; Heywood, 1989; Higgins, 1976).

Alternative interpretations of this Genesis story are understood by theologians such as Matthew Fox (1983/2020), Phyllis Trible (1978), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1994), and Elaine Pagels (1988). M. V. Fox (1983/2020) presents a positive progressive theological view when he notes:

> Augustine mixed his doctrine of original sin up with his peculiar notions about sexuality … for him all begetting of children and all lovemaking were at least venially sinful because one lost control.… Biblical spirituality cannot tolerate this put-down of the blessing that sexuality and lovemaking are by veiled references to original sin. The sooner the churches put distance between themselves and Augustine bad scriptural exegesis and translation and (his) put down of women and of sexuality, the sooner original sin will find its proper and very minor role in theology. (p. 49)

Like Fox, Pagels (1988) argues that Augustine's unfair and inaccurate equation of sex with original sin makes him a primary source of Western society's negative attitudes toward sexuality. The feminist theologian Phyllis Trible (1978) attempts to reclaim women's positive roles in scripture. In an article entitled "Genesis from Eve's point of View," Pamela Milne (1989, p. D3) highlights Trible's contribution to an alternative interpretation of this Genesis story:

> [Trible] addressed the fact that the serpent speaks only to Eve. Church fathers interpreted this to mean that woman is morally weaker than man and thus an easier prey; that woman is simpleminded, gullible, untrustworthy; or that she is more sexual and her sexuality is used by the serpent to ruin the man.
>
> Trible pointed out that all this is mere speculation: The text itself does not say *why* the serpent speaks to the woman. Why not speculate instead that the serpent questions her because she is the more intelligent of the two? Or because she has a better understanding of the divine command? Or because she is more independent? . . .
>
> Trible's Eve is not the simpleminded, gullible female who deviously seduces the male to sin but an "intelligent, informed, perceptive . . . theologian, ethicist, hermeneut and rabbi" who speaks with "clarity and authority" and who acts independently but without deception.

A great deal of sex-negative commentary by Christian theologians on the New Testament contributes to misogynistic and sex-negative interpretations of the Adam and Eve stories of the Old Testament (Wheeler-Reed, 2017). Traditional Christian teachings on St. Paul's writings suggest that early Christianity emphasized a dualism of bodily and sexuality impulses as bad and spirituality and Christian devotion as good (Molvaer, 2004). These Pauline ideas can be seen in his letters where he writes,

> So, I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the

> law of the flesh. (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha*, 1977, Gal. 5:16–18)

However, there have been theologians over the centuries who have challenged the belief that such scriptures can be interpreted only through a sex-negative lens (M. Fox, 1983/2020; Heywood, 1989).

The progressive Franciscan priest and theologian Richard Rohr attempts to redeem the writings of Paul by emphasizing that the word "flesh" in Paul's writings was understood by some theologians as "ego" rather than "sexuality." In making this shift, Rohr encourages believers to understand that anything that connects us to God and one another—including sex—is a move toward spirituality (Rohr, 2019).

> Life and God ask us to let go of our false self—the passing, egoic identity we've manufactured in order to cope and survive. To be freed from self-preoccupation, we must be centered in the Real, our inherent and unbreakable identity as God's beloved. Once we're connected to our Source, we know that our isolated, seemingly inferior or superior individual self is not that big a deal. The more we cling to self-importance and ego, the more we are undoubtedly living outside of union. (Rohr, 2017)

The devastating effect of this divide between mainstream Christianity and human sexuality, including fear-based attitudes toward the power of women's sexuality, can be seen in an array of historical events such as the Salem witch hunts (Bremer, 2011; Ray, 2015) as well as in ongoing Christian church practices such as the oppression of women and the denial of clerical leadership positions based purely on gender (Ferguson, 2018), the practice of requiring celibacy and restricting the priesthood to an exclusively male leadership position (Anderson, 2007; Verhoeven, 2015), and mainstream Christianity's discrimination against individuals who identify along the LGBTQ2SI continuum (Browne & Nash, 2014; Sumerau, 2012).

Therapists need to be aware of the impact this complex history can have on clients whose relationship with their sexuality seems to be irreconcilable with their Christian beliefs. It is essential for therapists working with such a population to learn about the painful history between Christian spirituality and human sexuality. But it is equally important for counsellors to know that there are a host of Christian theologians, an array of individual Christian churches, and even entire Christian denominations that support and promote a beautiful union between Christian spirituality and human sexuality in all its varied forms.

The institutional church has wrestled with human sexuality for an exceptionally long time. But there is an increasing number of individuals within the Church who are embracing a union between human sexuality and Christian spirituality.

There are people who believe that a delightful and fulfilling union is possible and can be truly transformative for the lives of our clients who identify as Christian. M. Fox (1983/2020) notes that pleasure is part of deep spirituality, an idea negatively impacted in theology by the focus on sin. Moore (1999, p. 208) makes a similar point related to the connection between sex and spirituality:

> In modern life sex is one of the numinous areas we have left, numinosity being the aura of awe and mystery usually associated with religious feeling. We have destroyed the mysteries of the planets and starts with our telescopes and roving machines. We have diminished the numinosity of nature through our countless studies and exploitations. But fortunately, we have not yet reduced the power of sex to stir deep desire and to compel contemplation.

Leading sex therapist Esther Perel has entered this conversation with her books *Mating in Captivity* (2006) and *The State of Affairs* (2017). In a TED talk entitled "The Secret to Desire in a Long-Term Relationship" (2013), she describes how she did her research in the small community in Belgium where she grew up. Everyone there was a Holocaust survivor and she said that in her research she was able to see two groups of people. One she describes as "those who didn't die" and the other she describes as "those who came back to life."

> Those who didn't die lived very tethered to the ground, could not experience pleasure, could not trust because when you are vigilant, worried, anxious, and insecure you can't lift your head to go and take off in space and be playful and safe and imaginative. Those who came back to life were those who understood the erotic as an antidote to death. They knew how to keep themselves alive.

For her, there is a clear connection between sexuality and spirituality. Spirituality is that which wakens individuals. People with spirituality/religion can feel a sense of aliveness, of vibrancy of renewal, and can embrace pleasure in all its forms. These ideas of sex-positive spirituality can be useful when integrated, as seen in Perel's work, with the couples who were in sexless or sex-challenged relationships. Couples often identify that they want more sex. However, Perel thinks that couples really want better sex that involves connecting to that quality of aliveness, of vibrancy, of renewal, of vitality.

Implications for Practitioners

We recommend that therapists include sexuality as part of holistic counselling with their Christian clients. Holistic assessments should include explorations of clients' spirituality/religion and their sexuality. Spiritual assessment questions, often focused on clients' understandings of their meaning and purpose, could include their understandings of sexuality. Exploring clients' beliefs concerning

the connections between spirituality and sexuality can help therapists to enhance their understanding of clients' present strengths and challenges. Gaining a better understanding of clients' past and present experiences in these areas of their lives can make it possible to collaborate with them in identifying possible future spiritual/religious and sexual connections.

Holistic therapy that includes sex-positive spirituality/religion gives space for clients to explore sexual issues. We have found little in the literature related to specific therapies for use with spiritual/religious clients to address sexual issues. This absence is in part what motivated us to write this article. In our therapy practices, we have found great promise in including both spirituality and sexuality in our assessment of clients and in our ongoing work with them. Both of us hold a holistic view of well-being, which includes spirituality and sexuality as having the potential to contribute to positive mental health. Working openly with clients within a sex-positive spirituality/religious framework can result in a strong therapeutic alliance that gives space for exploring and challenging spiritual beliefs related to sexuality.

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