

The Family Journal

<http://tfj.sagepub.com>

Religion and Divorce: Implications and Strategies for Counseling

Kathleen A. Murray

The Family Journal 2002; 10; 190

DOI: 10.1177/1066480702102008

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://tfj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/10/2/190>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors

Additional services and information for *The Family Journal* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://tfj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://tfj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations (this article cites 18 articles hosted on the SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):
<http://tfj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/10/2/190>

Religion and Divorce: Implications and Strategies for Counseling

Kathleen A. Murray

The religious and spiritual concerns of clients and families experiencing divorce can be complicated and deep rooted. Many counselors are faced with the task of helping clients through divorce within a religious context, a context that is uncomfortable for many. This article suggests several strategies to increase awareness of religious and spiritual implications of divorce for clients, counselors, supervisors, and society as a whole.

Elaine, a mother of two children, has separated from her husband and plans to follow through with a divorce. In counseling, she talks about her deep shame of becoming a divorcee. She continues to struggle with her self-concept concerning her perceived “failure.” She is a spiritual and religious woman, stating that only when she knew God would understand could she take the step of leaving her husband. Her thoughts were less clear on how her church viewed her. The elders in the church had encouraged her and her husband to seek counseling during the many years they struggled. She was unsure how they would view her now. When she attended church on Sundays with her children, she felt the eyes of the parish on her. Did they understand? Had she failed in their eyes? Her heart told her to trust in herself and her own personal relationship with God, but her mind could not help but question her decision. She turned to her counselor to help her make sense of it all.

The above example depicts the challenges faced by both clients and counselors as we navigate the waters of counseling and religion and spirituality. The specific issue of divorce lends itself to the complexity of this navigation. Divorce is viewed as a cultural, financial, legal, emotional, spiritual, and religious issue. Before examining divorce within this context, the definitions of religion and spirituality should be explored. This is by no means an easy task. The confusion with regard to these ambiguous terms has, in fact, been blamed for the dearth of research in this area. The construct of spirituality and religiosity is difficult to operationalize, thus many refrain from tackling research on a topic that is hard to clearly define (Ellison, 1983).

For the purposes of this article, a quote by Helminiak (2001) best defines and contrasts spirituality and religion. He writes that

spirituality entails lived-out commitment to a set of meanings and values—credo and commitments, visions and virtues, beliefs and ethics, cognitions and evaluations; organized religions traditionally carry and foster these. Religion tells us what life is about and how we are to live it. This vision and its implementation in individual lives is *spirituality*; *religion* is the social vehicle that, at its best, proclaims and supports spirituality. (p. 164)

Based on these definitions, Elaine is struggling with her personal spiritual beliefs in the face of potential conflicting beliefs from her religion and religious community. Counselors often struggle to respect clients’ religions and religious beliefs, especially if they differ from what counselors feel is best for clients.

Several have expressed the need for religion and spirituality to be addressed in the helping professions (Griffith & Rotter, 1999; Ingersoll, 1994; Kelly, 1994; Kelly, 1997; Pate & High, 1995), and others have suggested ways in which we can incorporate spirituality awareness, training, and advocacy into our work with individuals, families, supervisees, and the society as a whole. This article combines several of these strategies within the context of separation and divorce.

Spirituality, Religion, and Divorce

As seen in the above example of Elaine, spirituality and religion can play a major role in the client’s decisions, thoughts, and feelings concerning divorce. Religions are recognizing that “until death parts us” is not always logical or healthy for the couple involved. Orthodox Judaism, Protestant, Moslem, and Catholic religions have all made it possible for its members to divorce (albeit various procedures exist for each), but the level of acceptance the divorcees experience, explicit or implicit, varies (Kaslow, 1991a). For example, in some Catholic churches divorce is allowed, but remarriage within the Catholic Church is not permitted. Annulments are also permitted within the Catholic Church when it can be shown that

one person was not competent to enter marriage or lied about some aspect of the marriage agreement. One of the first religions to permit divorce, Orthodox Judaism, did so on the basis of the couple being unable to have children. It was assumed the wife was at fault (i.e., barren) and thus the husband could appeal, and still can, to the Rabbis for a religious divorce, also known as a Get. This practice is based on the idea that a husband's function is to procreate and having a wife who can provide a child is essential (Kaslow, 1991a). Even though divorce is now allowed in many religions, it still may come with a hefty price tag.

Perhaps the reason many religions have begun to permit divorce is that they can no longer ignore the statistics. The divorce rate of Judeo-Christians is equal to that of the general population (Smith, 1996). No one is spared, regardless of education, age, race, socioeconomic status, number of children, or religion (Smith & Smith, 2000). The likelihood is that between one half and two thirds of marriages will end in separation or divorce (Castro-Martin & Bumpass, 1989). No matter how many times couples hear this statistic, few think it will happen to them. Divorce signifies the end of a family unit, no matter if children are involved or not. This ending is often portrayed through significant losses (Leung & Robinson, 1990).

Divorce is often seen as a social, financial, and emotional loss, but the religious and/or spiritual angst cannot be denied. Given this, Kaslow (1991a) added religious divorce to the existing six-stage model of divorce defined originally by Bohannon (1970). This seven-stage sociocultural context of divorce does not assume sequence or degree of severity, yet provides a blueprint of the various issues and concerns that arise within divorce. These include emotional divorce, legal divorce, economic divorce, coparental divorce and the problems of custody, community divorce, psychic divorce, and religious divorce. The stage, or station, of religious divorce is characterized by feelings of self-doubt and a desire for the approval of the church (for this article, *the church* includes any religious or spiritual community/place of worship the divorcee identifies with, whether that be a church, synagogue, temple, mosque, etc. Also, the term *God* includes any identified supreme deity, such as God, Allah, Brahma, Buddha, etc.). Approval from the divorcee's God is also desired during this stage. Some may even fear the wrath of their God. Tasks of this stage can include gaining spiritual peace with oneself, the church, and possibly having a religious divorce ceremony administered (see Kaslow, 1991b, for full ceremony). Counselors are faced with the difficult task of possibly being the only one who supports clients' right to divorce (this assumes that counselors' own beliefs do not restrict them from doing so). Even in the most dire of situations, clients may feel as if they should stay in a marriage because "God would want them to." How does a counselor begin to process this with a client? There are no easy answers, but some potential interventions have been suggested. Although there are underlying theories of family therapy inherent in these interventions, the

suggestions can be incorporated into practice regardless of theoretical orientation.

The Client, Counselor, and Supervisor

Marriage is a valued social construct as well, making it difficult to discern the blurry lines of religious values and societal values. Clients may be faced with divergent opinions from their fellow parishioners, friends, family, and yes, their counselor (Smith & Smith, 2000). What can Elaine's counselor do to ensure that Elaine's needs are met with understanding and insight? Frame (2001) suggests that the client develop a spiritual genogram, a visual history of how spiritual and religious issues across generations continue to shape and affect the client's beliefs and values. Mapping significant life events such as births, marriages, divorces, remarriages, and deaths would help Elaine begin her genogram. Then Elaine could delineate spiritual and religious dimensions of her family: denomination, interfaith marriages, baptisms, first communions, events in her religious community, and stable and unstable affiliations. Depicting religious or spiritual closeness between family members may also shed light on Elaine's frame of reference. Did her family attend church together regularly and was this a source of bonding for them? Does religion or spirituality play a role in her relationships with family now? Frame maintains that this visual picture can bring conflicts and alliances into awareness.

An important factor for Elaine in addition to tracing her family's religious and spiritual patterns would be to pay particular attention to divorces in her family. Has anyone else in her family been separated or divorced? Did the family talk about it and how was it viewed? How did Elaine view it? That being explored, Elaine and her counselor could discuss how religion and spirituality played into these events. For example, how did or does her church seem to respond to divorced individuals? What did she notice about the religiosity or spirituality of her relative who is divorced? Did that relative attend church and how was he or she received? Did that relative stop attending church and what are her hypotheses about why that was? What messages did she learn from this? If she has no relatives who have been divorced or separated, that too can be explored. Were there couples in her family who seemed really unhappy and yet refused to get a divorce or ignored the problem? What message did Elaine learn from that? Elaine may not realize that her thoughts and feelings about divorce and religion are heavily embedded in past family patterns and experiences. Constructing the genogram will offer her the opportunity to explore these thoughts and delineate what she was taught versus what she believes.

The counselor's role in helping clients construct and understand their spiritual genograms is pivotal. Frame (2000) outlines the ethical considerations of addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling. Both the ethical codes of the American Counseling Association (ACA) and the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (IAMFC)

maintain that counselors should be competent to discuss these issues with clients (ACA, 1995; IAMFC, 1993). She suggests that counselors familiarize themselves with the current literature as well as seek out clergy and other religious consultants. Frame (2001) and Haug (1998) also suggest using the spiritual genogram in counselor and family therapist training. Counselors must know their own spiritual beliefs and attitudes before attempting to explore them with others. Research shows that religion and spirituality have been widely ignored in counselor education programs (Kelly, 1994; Pate & High, 1995) as well as psychology/psychiatry programs (Sansone, Khatain, & Rodenhauser, 1990; Shafranske & Malony, 1990). Spiritual genograms may be the key to opening the door to this much-needed discussion.

Spiritual genograms can also be used within supervision as a tool to help the supervisee understand his or her reactions to a client's religious or spiritual concerns. Frame (2001) suggests that supervisors consult with colleagues if they feel unprepared to discuss these issues with supervisees, and Haug (1998) adds that supervisors themselves should construct a spiritual genogram. It is safe to say that many supervisors today did not address religion and spiritual issues in their graduate programs and further attention may be needed in this area. Supervisors can take the extra step to explore their own beliefs, ensuring that all levels of spirituality (client-counselor-supervisor) would then be on the table (see Frame, 2001, and Haug, 1998, for detailed genogram instructions).

The Extended Family

Counselors who are working with clients and families with religious and spiritual beliefs may find they are also working with an extended family: the church. Clients may turn to their churches in times of need for love and acceptance. Separation and divorce presents such a time. How does the church really feel about separation and divorce? Smith and Smith (2000) attempted to shed light on this question by administering a divorce/separation questionnaire to three randomly selected religious institutions (denomination not specified) in the New York City area. A pattern of decreased acceptance, support, and assistance emerged from the 343 men and women participants in all three churches. The participants also lacked awareness of the emotional impact of separation or divorce, such as feelings of loneliness, isolation, and rejection. Participants' awareness of the influence of separation or divorce on the children involved was also found to be lacking.

Having received this data, Smith and Smith (2000) developed a Divorce/Separation Awareness Seminar based on social construction theory. This theory encourages a broad view of the family and the systems they may interact with on a daily basis. As mentioned, the counselor should keep in mind the "extended family," or social constructs within the client's world that may have a significant impact on the client. In this case, the church system should not be ignored (Boscolo & Bertrando, 1993). Armed with this theoretical understanding,

Smith and Smith used a six-stage therapeutic model (Atwood & Dershowitz, 1992) to organize the seminar:

1. Joining the family meaning system
2. Proposing the notion of a socially constructed family meaning system
3. Learning the family meaning system
4. Challenging the family meaning system
5. Amplifying the family meaning system
6. Stabilizing the new family meaning system.

Over a period of 3 weeks, parishioners were educated on the above stages in two ways. One way included helping the parishioners to see how they could best support separated or divorced members of their church. For example, the seminar leaders described what it meant to join the family meaning system, being supportive throughout the members' painful experience, and letting them know the church is understanding and accepting. Common thoughts and feelings of members experiencing separation or divorce were discussed as well as strategies the parishioners could use to increase support and not contribute to the societal stigma associated with divorce.

Parishioners were also informed of how a professional counselor may help a person or family experiencing separation or divorce use this model. Seminar leaders increased parishioners' awareness of the skills needed to understand the impact of socially constructed ideas and encouraged the parish to refer members to appropriate services when necessary. For example, the parishioners were shown the benefits of constructing a genogram. With an increased understanding of how counseling and specific strategies such as the genogram may help, parishioners may be more likely to encourage separated or divorced members to seek professional help.

Overall, this seminar provided feedback to the participants of the parish on their beliefs and attitudes about separation and divorce, increased their awareness of the issues facing separated or divorced members, educated the parish on basic skills needed to support and assist separated or divorced members, and provided a greater understanding of the role of professional counseling in aiding their fellow parishioners in these times of need. Key to this intervention was the idea that counselors should be aware of the church environment experienced by their client and advocate toward bridging that alliance between counselor-client-church based on a social constructivist theory (Smith & Smith, 2000).

Collaborating with Clergy

Collaboration with the parish, as seen above, is one way to advocate for the spiritual and religious needs of clients. Another specific way is to work with the clergy. Weaver (1995) reported that an average of 15% of clergy's 40- to 60-hour workweek is devoted to pastoral counseling. And although 95% of 2,000 Protestant pastors surveyed indicated having had some counselor training, only 39% felt skilled in mar-

riage and family counseling (Orthner, 1986). Based on the expressed interest by clergy for continued training in this area and a call by Weaver, Koenig, and Larson (1997) to increase collaborative efforts between counselors and clergy, Getz, Kirk, and Driscoll (1999) developed a workshop for clergy entitled "Ministering to Dysfunctional Families." From a family systems perspective, the workshop presenters focused on four key components of family dynamics: communication, distance, hierarchy, and adaptability to change. All of these are vital issues of families and/or individual clients experiencing separation or divorce. This experiential, psychoeducational workshop consisted of lectures, group activities, and open discussion. Throughout the workshop, the clergy were invited to share their experiences of working with the families within their parish. Theological views and subsequent desirable interventions, even if they differed from the proposed counseling perspective, were also discussed.

The research generated from pre- and postworkshop data (see Getz et al., 1999) indicated that not only did the clergy participants learn from the workshop trainers but the trainers learned from them. The trainers learned that the perceptions of clergy with regard to marriage and family issues were fairly similar to theirs, supporting the idea of collaboration postulated by Weaver et al. (1997). The trainers also received more information about the resources clergy used to assist in helping families. The results indicated that the clergy showed an increase in confidence, an appreciation for the family systems perspective in working with complex family dynamics, and a higher receptiveness to new and differing views. This is especially significant in light of Meylink and Gorsuch's (1987) findings that clergy referred less than 10% of parishioners to other helping professionals. Although Getz et al. (1999) was an exploratory study, the results are nevertheless encouraging for the proposed alliance of counselors and clergy.

Closing Thoughts

This article outlined three potential interventions counselors can employ when faced with spiritual and religious issues in counseling clients experiencing separation or divorce. Although these interventions can be used when addressing other issues with religious undertones (interfaith marriages, abortion, suicide, death), divorce was the focus of this article. The spiritual genogram assists the client, counselor, and supervisor in addressing familial patterns, beliefs, and messages. Although this is essential, it is but one layer of the levels of involvement. The religious or spiritual community members, or church, may also benefit from education about the losses associated with divorce, their role in supporting (or not) fellow parishioners, and how professional counselors may help. And last but not least, the clergy may also be included in this advocacy equation. Developing workshops and seminars to promote the collaboration of counselors with clergy can only bridge that alliance and help our clients in the long run. Divorce within a spiritual and religious context does

not have to be feared by counselors. With these interventions, continued advocacy, and a growing body of literature and research, that fear can be transformed into a working knowledge.

REFERENCES

- American Counseling Association. (1995). *Code of ethics and standards of practice*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Atwood, J., & Dershowitz, S. (1992). Constructing a sex and marital therapy frame: Ways to help couples deconstruct sexual problems. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy, 18*, 196-218.
- Bohannon, P. (1970). The six stations of divorce. In P. Bohannon (Ed.), *Divorce and after: An analysis of the emotional and social problems of divorce* (pp. 29-55). New York: Doubleday.
- Boscolo, L., & Bertrando, P. (1993). *The times of times*. New York: Norton.
- Castro-Martin, T., & Bumpass, L. L. (1989). Recent trends in marital disruption. *Demography, 26*, 37-51.
- Ellison, C. W. (1983). Spiritual well-being: Conceptualization and measurement. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 11*(4), 330-340.
- Frame, M. W. (2000). Spiritual and religious issues in counseling: Ethical considerations. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 8*(1), 72-74.
- Frame, M. W. (2001). The spiritual genogram in training and supervision. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 9*(2), 109-115.
- Getz, H. G., Kirk, G., & Driscoll, L. G. (1999). Clergy and counselors—collaborating toward new perspectives. *Counseling and Values, 44*(1), 40-54.
- Griffith, B. A., & Rotter, J. C. (1999). Families and spirituality: Therapists as facilitators. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 7*(2), 161-164.
- Haug, I. E. (1998). Spirituality as a dimension of family therapists' clinical training. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 20*(4), 471-483.
- Helminiak, D. A. (2001). Treating spiritual issues in secular psychotherapy. *Counseling and Values, 45*(3), 163-189.
- Ingersoll, R. E. (1994). Spirituality, religion, and counseling: Dimensions and relationships. *Counseling and Values, 38*(2), 98-111.
- International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors. (1993). Ethical code for the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 1*, 73-77.
- Kaslow, F. (1991a). The sociocultural context of divorce. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 13*(6), 583-607.
- Kaslow, F. (1991b). The divorce ceremony: A healing strategy. In T. Nelson & T. Trepper (Eds.), *101 favorite family therapy interventions*. New York: Haworth.
- Kelly, E. W. (1994). The role of religion and spirituality in counselor education: A national survey. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 33*, 227-237.
- Kelly, E. W. (1997). Religion and spirituality in variously accredited counselor training programs: A comment on Pate and High (1995). *Counseling and Values, 42*(1), 7-11.

- Leung, A. K., & Robinson, L. M. (1990). Children of divorce. *Royal Society Journal of Health, 1105*, 161-163.
- Meylink, W., & Gorsuch, R. (1987). Relationship between clergy and psychologists: The empirical data. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 7*, 56-72.
- Orthner, D. K. (1986). *Pastoral counseling: Caring and caregivers in the United Methodist Church*. Nashville, TN: United Methodist Church, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry.
- Pate, R. H., & High, J. (1995). The importance of client religious beliefs and practices in the education of counselors in CACREP-accredited programs. *Counseling and Values, 40*, 2-5.
- Sansone, R. A., Khatain, K., & Rodenhauer, P. (1990). The role of religion in psychiatric education. *Academic Psychiatry, 14*, 34-38.
- Shafranske, E. P., & Malony, H. N. (1990). Clinical psychologists' religious and spiritual orientations and their practice of psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy, 27*, 72-78.
- Smith, A. H. (1996). *When loving you is destroying me*. Columbus, GA: Brentwood.

- Smith, J. A., & Smith, A. H. (2000). Parishioner attitudes toward the divorced/separated: Awareness seminars as counseling interventions. *Counseling and Values, 45*(1), 17-27.
- Weaver, A. J. (1995). Has there been a failure to prepare and support parish-based clergy in their role as front-line community mental health workers? A review. *The Journal of Pastoral Care, 49*, 129-149.
- Weaver, A. J., Koenig, H. G., & Larson, D. B. (1997). Marriage and family therapists and the clergy: A need for clinical collaboration, training, and research. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 23*, 13-25.

Kathleen A. Murray is a doctoral student in the Counselor Education program at the University of Virginia and a licensed professional counselor. Before returning to school, she worked as a certified rehabilitation counselor with clients adjusting to acquired disabilities. Her research interests include supervision, group process, and spiritual and religious issues in counseling.

