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Uniting Spirituality and Sexual Counseling: Semitic Traditions

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A barrier between spirituality and counseling appears to be fading away as the quest for spiritual understanding expands. Practitioners who unite sexual counseling and spirituality must not only examine their personal experiences, values, and beliefs in the spiritual realm, but must also become familiar with a wide array of spiritual traditions that clients can and will bring to the counseling process. This article provides information about spirituality and sexuality from both Islamic and Jewish perspectives.

Keywords: spirituality; sexual counseling; Judaism; Islam; Semitic

Interest in the spiritual dimension of life continues to grow within the culture generally (Miller & Thoresen, 2003) and within fields such as mental health (Miller, 1999; Richards & Bergin, 1997, 2000; Shafranske, 1996; Worthington et al., 2003) and physical health (George, Larson, Keonig, & McCullough, 2000; Plante & Sherman, 2001). By all indications, a spiritual or religious dimension seems to affect positive outcome in both mental and physical health (George et al., 2000; Keonig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). Perhaps this is one of the reasons such interest continues to grow, even among those who might be somewhat reluctant to bridge the gaps that have traditionally existed between spirituality and religion and sciences and social sciences such as medicine and counseling. This infusion of spirituality into the mental health field is certainly contrary to the historical positions of such renowned psychologists as Sigmund Freud (1927/1964) and Albert Ellis (1983). Regardless of the reason for the growth of spiritual interest, the spiritual background of clients continues to be a growing consideration among counselors (Turner, Fox, Center, & Kiser, 2006; Turner, Center, & Kiser, 2004; Ullery, 2004).

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Although precision and consensus is difficult, the National Institute for Healthcare Research has defined spirituality as “the feelings, thoughts, experiences and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred” (Hill et al., 1998, p. 21). The term *religion* includes the means and methods for conducting such a search with the requirement that these rituals and behaviors are validated and supported from within an identifiable group of people (Hill et al., 1998).

Further exploration of the dimensions of spirituality reveals (a) a quest for wholeness and harmony, (b) a relationship to one's ultimate concern in life, (c) some form of experiential transcendence, and (d) the inclusion of one's values, beliefs, mission, sense of meaning and purpose, and the reach for that which is greater than oneself (Turner et al., 2006). It is precisely the transcendent nature of spirituality that implies positive outcomes (e.g., greater personal and interpersonal fulfillment) when the spiritual dimension is considered in counseling in general, and in sexual counseling in particular.

With the growing interest in the impact of spirituality on individuals' lives, it is imperative for counselors to take a holistic view of clients, assessing the spiritual belief system along with the cognitive, biological, and emotional dimensions. It follows from the consideration of the clients' spiritual background that a richer and deeper therapeutic relationship may result. To establish rapport and to minimize bias, counselors who seek to unite spirituality and sexual counseling must examine their own spiritual and sexual experiences, values and beliefs, and seek to familiarize themselves with the basic tenets and philosophies of the spiritual tradition of the client.

In light of the wide array of spiritual and personal experiences, can there truly be a good fit between counselor and client? Keshet-Orr (2003) emphatically stated the following: “It is incumbent upon us to be sufficiently well-informed about any cultural group . . .” (p. 223). Additionally, Keshet-Orr encouraged the counselor to consider clients' gender and political background as well as seek to hear the traditions,

myths, folk tales, and other anecdotes that have been influential in the formation of clients' personal beliefs.

Previous articles by the authors have explored the union of spirituality and sexual counseling by exploring sexuality within the Christian (Turner et al., 2004) and Eastern (Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism) traditions (Turner et al., 2006). In this article, attention is given to the union of sexuality and spirituality in Islam and Judaism, two major world religions, commonly known as Semitic. Semitic is most often used to designate a Middle Eastern family of languages that include Arabic, Aramaic, and Hebrew, among others. The close connection between language and culture extends the use of Semitic to include both culture and ethnicity.

Islam and Judaism are the two largest religious minorities in the United States (ARIS-The Graduate Center, 2001; Kelly, 1996). Estimates of adherents to Judaism worldwide vary from 12 to 15 million, with 5 to 6 million residing in the United States. Devotees of Islam number from 700 million to 1.2 billion. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population at 170 million; Pakistan is second at 136 million. Approximately 6 to 8 million Muslims reside in the United States (Ali, Liu, & Humedian, 2004).

ISLAM

Islam is a religion from the Arabic root *salaam*, meaning *peace*. Muslim is "one who submits to the will of Allah" (Ali et al., 2004, p. 636). Contrary to popular Western opinion, Islam is not "Mohammedism" and Muslims may take offense at being called "Mohammedans" (Ali et al., 2004).

As within most spiritual traditions, especially major religions, there are minor belief differences among the members. Although this is also true for Muslims, Muslims are bound by a common belief and practice rooted in the *Qu'ran* (Koran) and in the *Hadith* (a collection of sayings attributed to and about Muhammed). It should be noted at this point that the translation of any language into another risks losing the nuances of meaning peculiar to the original. However, it is assumed that the essence of meaning is preserved. Common practice includes the following five acts of worship (five pillars of Islam): (a) affirmation that there is no God but Allah and Muhammed is His prophet (*Shadaada*), (b) ritual prayer five times per day (*Salat*), (c) sharing wealth with the needy (*Zakat*), (d) fasting from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan (*Sawm*), and (f) a pilgrimage to Mecca (Muhammed's birthplace) once during the person's life (*Hajj*; Ali et al., 2004; Kelly, 1996).

Kelly (1996) noted that the differences among Muslims are primarily due to historical, political, and theological controversy. One example of these differences is the existence of five major schools of Islamic law. One particular difference of opinion is the manner and degree to which Islamic religious observance and law may be accommodated to American culture and other non-Muslim cultures (Kelly, 1996).

VIEW OF SEXUALITY

Basic views of sex and sexuality among Muslims dictate that sex is only permissible within marriage and outside marriage sex is viewed as fornication and is punishable ("... Flog each of them with one hundred stripes: Let not compassion move you in their case . . .;" *The Qur'an*, 2001, Nur 24:2). Homosexuality is considered a perversion (Obermeyer, 2000).

A basic, positive, and oft-quoted dictum is as follows: "He is your garment and you are his" (Q. S. al-Baqarah 2:187). This passage from the *The Qu'ran* prescribes equal and complementary gender and sexual relations in marriage (Munir, 2002). "Garment" is the alter ego. With a new garment, one gains as it were a new personality. This "garment" hides the body, blocks private parts from the eye, and protects the wearer. Each spouse protects the partner's honor. The husband and wife are equal and complement one another (Munir, 2002).

However, in spite of this egalitarian and complementary view, there is much more evidence that sexuality is nonegalitarian. Such practices as the veiling and required seclusion of women, various female genital surgeries, the requirement of blood as proof of the bride's virginity, and honor killings (death to wives who have dishonored their husbands), are all evidence of the male-dominated, female-restricted nature of Muslim sexuality (Obermeyer, 2000).

Furthermore, the *Qu'ran* (al-Nisa' 4:34) gives men significant authority over women, giving them the right to discipline or punish women to ensure obedience. *Nusyuz* (rebellion) refers to acts of defiance or displays of superiority by the wife. This includes such acts as exercising freedom of movement or objecting to sexual contact when desired by the husband (Munir, 2002).

The gender differential is further noticed in that little mention is made of mutual consent, reciprocity, or shared pleasure (Obermeyer, 2000). Men are superior to women and are the key to societal stability. Men's desires and needs are natural. The woman's sole obligation in marriage is making intercourse possible. Female sexuality is seen as a powerful force that can lead to societal chaos if unchecked. Women negotiate with this power and gain material support. They increase and maintain their power by not being overly interested in sex, never asking for it or initiating it, but allowing their husbands to have sex whenever they want it (Obermeyer, 2000).

Further, Obermeyer (2000) noted that men separate love from sex. Muslim men believe that too much attachment to the wife means that the man is "bewitched." If a man shows tenderness (*hnin*), he is viewed as weak, feminine, and under a spell from his wife.

In non-Muslim countries, the prevailing culture seems to influence Muslim views of sexuality, husband-wife relationships, and sexual decision making. Traditional, authoritarian, patriarchal relationships tend to become more egalitarian. There is a greater display of individualism (Ahmadi, 2003).

So, in some cases, the prevailing culture seems to have a mitigating effect on Muslim traditions.

JUDAISM

Orthodox Jews, the most traditional branch of Judaism, believe in one God, who created the world, who intervenes in the world today, and who made known His will through the Torah, the five books of Moses (Blass & Fagan, 2001). Jews are required to observe the 613 commandments, or *mitzvot*, set forth in the Torah and expounded on in the Talmud and other rabbinic writings. Many aspects of daily life, including sexual behavior, are governed by these laws (Petok, 2001).

Keshet-Orr (2003) summarized some of the orthodox teachings about sex: Sex is to be experienced only in the male superior position, the lights are to be off, the husband is responsible to ensure the wife's sexual pleasure and gratification, and intercourse is to be limited to specific times that evolve around menstruation.

Petok (2001) noted that the heart of the laws governing sexual relations is the prohibition of sexual intercourse during *niddah*, the period of time when the woman is menstruating and the 7 days after that time. At the end of the 7 days, she is ritually cleansed in a ritual bath called the *mikvah*. The maintenance of ritual purity for the woman, as well as her influence on the ritual purity of her contacts, is of utmost importance. She must learn (and is taught, usually by the wife of the rabbi, when she is about to marry) how to calculate times of impurity (the days during and after menstruation when intercourse is prohibited). The bride to be is also instructed about proper and improper contact. This includes such things as not sitting on the bed with her husband at certain times, handing him food or drink in nonprovocative ways, and so forth.

Thus, although sex is seen as a God-given impulse that is normal, healthy, good, intended, and commanded within a heterosexual marriage, it requires careful, rigorous control. Such control is necessary so as not to transgress the marriage or the laws of *niddah* (Keshet-Orr, 2003). Sexual activity is to take place within an atmosphere of holiness and purity. This precludes free and spontaneous forms of intimacy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Counselors of both Muslims and Jews must be aware that clients from these traditions will generally be more conservative and traditional than professional therapists. Religious authority in both Judaism and Islam holds powerful sway among adherents. Consideration of alternatives that deviate from accepted tradition will most likely be reluctantly entertained, if at all. Ways to facilitate the therapeutic relationship need careful consideration. It should also be noted that Muslim and Jewish clients are somewhat reluctant to seek consultation or treatment from mental health professionals

(Blass & Fagan, 2001; Nassar-McMillan & Hakim-Larson, 2003), preferring to consult initially with religious leaders. When treatment is sought from mental health professionals, some of the presenting issues that are pertinent to spirituality and sexual counseling include acculturation problems, marital conflicts, gender roles (Nassar-McMillan & Hakim-Larson, 2003), and conditions that interfere with fertility or other threats to marriage viability (Blass & Fagan, 2001).

Counselors of Muslim clients must be aware of several forces that interact: Islamic doctrine that permits pleasure for both married partners; the social understanding of sex as dominating and penetrative which privileges the man; the place of honor and special value on women's bodies, thus restricting their autonomy and holding them to traditional standards; the separation of love from sex and marriage; and the awareness among many women of the connection between sex and power. The counselor must be aware of these spiritual influences.

Furthermore, contradictions are inherent in this system. The clear and sometimes unclear lines between honor and shame, chastity and permissiveness, domination and submission, and purity and pollution, for example, mean that the Muslim client will often express great ambivalence about sexuality and sexual issues.

In one survey (Kelly, 1996), over 85% of Muslim respondents said it was somewhat important or very important for the counselor to have an understanding of Islamic values. Understanding Islamic values can help facilitate the counseling relationship and promote mutual respect.

Those who work with Jewish populations must be aware of the lingering and powerful effects of the holocaust on some clients. Because of the tremendous loss of life among Jews during the holocaust, marriage and producing children is considered fundamental, ensuring preservation and continuation of Jewish people within society. The dual function of pleasure and reproduction may be taken for granted by some; for others, not only are they completely linked, it is impossible to even think of sexual pleasure without attention given to the desire to reproduce (Keshet-Orr, 2003). This may be difficult for counselors to grasp in the Western world of contraception, abortion, and sexual gratification.

Counselors must be aware of the sway of spiritual ritual and tradition in the lives of clients and be open to the clients' cherished values. For example, strict adherence to the law of *niddah* (refraining from sexual contact and many other forms of intimacy during half of each month—during menstruation and the 7 days after) may seem to the counselor to be restrictive, unliberated, archaic folklore. However, the admonition to engage in sexual intercourse after the ritual cleansing bath at the end of *niddah* has been shown to result in a renewal of passion not unlike that of newlyweds, a greater enjoyment of sexual passion, heightened anticipation for intimacy, and greater fidelity between spouses (Blass & Fagan, 2001). In this light, counselors are enjoined to (a) be open to clients from different cultures; (b) learn as much as

possible about the client population; (c) free self from bias, preconception, and prejudice; and (d) appreciate the richness of the spiritual and sexual experience of individuals from other traditions and cultures.

Having explored the fundamental tenets and philosophies of the Christian, Semitic, and Eastern spiritual traditions that relate to spirituality and sexual counseling, practitioners need to also be aware of special ethical considerations that accompany this type of work. This is the topic of future work by the authors.

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