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Chet Weld and Karen Eriksen
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The Challenge of Religious Conflicts in Couples Counseling

Chet Weld

Renewal Centers

Karen Eriksen

Florida Atlantic University

Spiritual or religious conflicts in couples can challenge the forward progress of couples counseling. The statistics on the number of clients and therapists who believe in God and of clients who would like to address spiritual issues in both secular and religious counseling must persuade all counselors to become familiar with the ways to address such issues. This article adds to the literature that educates family counselors on strategies for approaching spiritual differences and conflicts in families. A case is offered as an illustration.

Keywords: *religious conflicts; spiritual differences; couples counseling; spirituality; spiritual values*

Religion or spirituality is an important influence in the lives of most Americans. According to research, 61% of Americans claim that religion is very important in their lives, 24% indicate that religion is fairly important, and more than 80% identify their religious preference as Christian (Gallup Organization, 2004). Perhaps as a result, many counseling clients want to discuss religious or spiritual issues, even in the context of secular counseling centers (Rose, Westefeld, & Ansley, 2001).

In response to this need, the American Counseling Association (2005) has included in the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* the requirements that all “counselors actively attempt to understand the diverse cultural backgrounds of the clients they serve” and “explore their own cultural identities and how these affect their values and beliefs about the counseling process” (Section A, Introduction, p. 4). The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related

Authors’ Note: This practice-oriented article incorporates couples counseling techniques that could be helpful to marriage and family counselors from many backgrounds and orientations. Although some of the concepts and methods were derived from the authors’ experiences in working with Christian couples, the approach may apply to couples from other religious and spiritual perspectives. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Karen Eriksen via e-mail: keriksen@fau.edu

Educational Programs (2001) has extended this principle to include sensitivity to “spiritual values” (Section 2, Standard K 2).

The spirituality of clients has understandably, then, increasingly become a professional consideration for mental health practitioners, whether religious or not (Miranti & Burke, 1995; Wade & Worthington, 2003). However, mental health professionals also demonstrate a high degree of personal spiritual commitment, with the majority claiming some type of religious affiliation, believing that spirituality is personally relevant, and valuing personal prayer (Bergin & Jensen, 1990; Shafranske & Malony, 1990). Marriage and family therapists incorporate religion into their personal and professional lives more than professionals in other mental health disciplines. Of marriage and family therapists, 95% believe that there is a relationship between spiritual and mental health, 94% believe that spirituality is an important aspect of their personal lives, 82% report regularly spending time getting in touch with their spirituality, and 71% report praying regularly (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, 2002).

Despite the high regard given to spiritual issues by marriage and family counselors, only 62% believe that a spiritual dimension should be included in clinical practice, and only 47% believe that it is necessary to address a client’s spirituality to help him or her (Carlson et al., 2002). Bergin and Jensen (1990) determined that only 29% of clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, clinical social workers, and marriage and family therapists “expressed a belief . . . that religious matters are important for treatment efforts with all or many of their clients” (p. 6). Carlson et al. (2002) attributed the disparity between beliefs in the importance of spirituality and the integration of spirituality in psychotherapy to (a) a lack of education on how to integrate spirituality and therapy and (b) “the newness of spirituality as a viable topic for therapy” (p. 167).

This article begins to address the lack of education by investigating how marriage and family counselors might address religious or spiritual disparities presented by couples when the diverse perspectives are the stated problem or

when the differences substantially affect the presenting problems. The diversity might include religious and nonreligious members of a partnership, highly religious and less religious or spiritual partners, or partners with differing religious heritages. For simplicity's sake, we have referred to the partners as highly religious and less religious most of the time.

STRATEGIES FOR WORK WITH SPIRITUAL DIVERSITY

Conduct a Spiritual Assessment

When conflicts over spirituality emerge in couples therapy, spiritual sensitivity requires assessing the role of the spiritual in clients' lives (Wolf & Stevens, 2001). Assessment may begin with a question such as, "What is your religious affiliation, if any?" (Tan, 1996, p. 370), and may move on to exploring "religious or spiritual experiences, values, and beliefs" (Wolf & Stevens, 2001, p. 70). With the spiritually diverse couple, the nature and severity of problems related to religious or spiritual differences directs the course of inquiry. When one of the partners does not consider himself or herself to be religious, questions that relate to spirituality but defocus specific religious differences may be helpful (e.g., "What gives your life meaning?" "What values do you hold that might be similar to your partner's?" "How does your spiritual or inner life influence your life?"). The therapist may also inquire about the religious history and affiliation or nonaffiliation of both partners, emphasizing the spirituality of each partner (rather than only the religious affiliation of one partner) as a means of reframing religious differences. The therapist's office may be the clients' only safe place to discuss religious or spiritual issues because such discussion is productively guided by a facilitator.

Build the Therapeutic Alliance

Sensitivity to clients' expectations builds the therapeutic alliance and improves outcomes (Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Kim, Ng, & Ahn, 2005; Strauser, Lustig, & Donnell, 2004). Therefore, therapists need to join with each partner by exploring each partner's expectations for counseling, particularly expectations about the inclusion of spirituality in discussions of the problem and solutions.

Joining is especially important if a religious partner is highly religious and the therapist is not, as a highly religious client is not likely to want a therapist who is religiously different or who appears disinterested in the client's religion (Ripley, Worthington, & Berry, 2001). Counselors may thus need to invest time in hearing and empathizing with the fears of the religious partner. A conservative Christian, for example, may fear that he or she is living in sin by being married to a nonreligious partner, which may incur the wrath of God (the Bible indicates that Christians should not be "unequally yoked" with "unbelievers"; 2 Corinthians

6:14). Highly religious partners of any faith may be afraid of "contamination"; that is, that the therapist or the less religious partner may persuade them to believe in ways that lead them away from God's will or away from their faith (Eriksen, Marston, & Korte, 2002). They may fear that their partner, by not believing in the way that they do and being saved, will be punished or that the partner may influence their children away from faith, causing future harm to the children.

If resistance prevents a fruitful discussion of either partner's faith position, resistance might be framed as reflecting the less religious client's precontemplative or contemplative stage of personal, religious, or spiritual development (Prochaska, 1995); that is, that the less religious client has not fully chosen the religion but is willing and able to weigh carefully what making such a choice might mean. This more developmental reframe implies that the partners are in a developmental or growth process with respect to faith, that no one remains static. Such a developmental perspective may foster openness in both partners' discussions of the other's points of view, in the highly religious partner—because such a framework conceives of the less religious partner as growing spiritually as well—and in the less religious partner—who would most likely not object to growing spiritually.

Utilize Therapist Spirituality

Prest and Keller (1993) suggested that therapists make use of their own spirituality during sessions. Wolf and Stevens (2001) further suggested that "when listening to a couple from a spiritual perspective, the counselor might take a meditative stance" (p. 71), which may enhance (a) the counselor's abilities to notice subtleties in the couple's communication process, (b) the capacity for compassionate responses, (c) creativity in the partners' responses to each other, and (d) the likelihood that clients may release rigid beliefs (Anderson & Worthen, 1997). Anderson and Worthen (1997) offered suggestions on how to achieve a meditative stance. For instance, counselors might imagine that the couple is bathed in light while silently repeating that the couple is being loved, pray silently during the session that the couple will have courage, monitor their own breathing, and/or model forgiveness and acceptance for the couple.

Include God as a Member of the Family System

Spiritually diverse families may benefit from therapy that envisions God as a member of the family system. Psychodrama may even be used to make the influence of God visible in the family system (Griffith, 1986). Griffith (1986) expressed the belief that families can conceptualize God in ways that stabilize relationships and mediate family transactions. He stated,

In the psychological role of a transitional object, God can be usefully employed . . . in therapeutic interventions when the

therapist keeps the focus upon the interpersonal relationship with God rather than the specific content of religious beliefs. This approach can access a vital resource in the family, particularly when conditions for therapy are otherwise difficult, such as an isolated, enmeshed dyad presenting alone for therapy. (p. 609)

By defocusing specific religious beliefs and helping the couple to understand their relationship with a previously unacknowledged presence in the family, partners can avoid emotion-laden theological discussions and may be able to discuss and talk with God as they would discuss and talk with any other family member. Questions addressed to each family member about the place of God in the family will help the therapist to assess relationships with God and with one another and to determine the intersections among these relationships.

Next, Griffith (1986) suggested, members of the couple need insight into their personal contributions to relationship patterns. We have found that such insight can be aided by the therapist discussing ways in which the less religious partner distances from the more religious partner and the ways the more religious partner pushes his or her partner away by overspiritualizing, or making frequent references to the influence of God in life's mundane details. Or if the therapist discovers that sex is used as a bargaining chip, the therapist may help the less religious partner to initiate a brief discussion of what the more religious partner learned in a recent Bible study rather than withholding sex to punish the more religious partner. Reciprocally, the therapist may help the more religious partner to understand that initiating sex more frequently may invite more satisfying behaviors from the less religious partner, including meaningful discussions of faith. The therapist could ask the more religious partner, "If God were to tell you to do 'the loving thing,' what would that be?" The less religious partner could be asked, "If distancing hasn't worked to improve your marriage, what might be a better solution?" Griffith notes that as the therapist includes God in everyone's conception of the family system, there may be "little consequent change in publicly acknowledged religious doctrines" (p. 615) but positive changes in relationship satisfaction.

Rizzuto (2004) also envisioned God as a family member and pointed to the Catholic belief in "God, the Virgin Mary, and a multitude of saints and angels [as a] 'cloud of witnesses' who always hover around" (p. 439). Therapeutically, a belief that one is surrounded by God and other divine presences "has the advantages of the extended family: There are many relatives available, and one of them may come to the aid of the one in need" (p. 439). Regardless of the more religious partner's specific beliefs, both may be able to conceptualize God as a helpful presence in a difficult situation (including the marital troubles), and the less religious partner can be encouraged to somehow live in peace with this

helpful presence. For example, the therapist can inquire of a nonreligious partner,

What would you do if you allowed an old high school friend of your partner's to stay at your house for a month and then discovered that you would have preferred that the friend had stayed at a hotel? How would you maintain a positive relationship with your partner until the month was over?

Of course, God's presence will not disappear in 1 month, and so the spiritually diverse couple must devise a long-term plan for living in peace with God as a family member.

Rizzuto (1979) pointed out the psychological function of God as a "transitional object" that has "psychic usefulness" (p. 179) to the family. For instance, family members can displace a wide range of emotions onto God to maintain the status quo of family functioning. God may be viewed as "always being there for love, cold disdain, mistreatment, fear, hatred, or any other human emotion" (p. 179). The therapist may explore whether displacing emotions onto God or unconsciously welcoming divisive transactions around the subject of God or religion has, indeed, enabled the survival of the relationship. If so, the therapist might reframe the spiritual or religious conflict as the "intuitive wisdom" of the couple. An exploration of what Friedman terms "un-worked-out-ness" (p. 152) may enable giving up the old relationship with God to foster a new means of creating stability in the relationship.

Explore the "Divine Triangle"

Also seeking to therapeutically incorporate the unseen presence of God into the counseling room, Butler and Harper (1994) suggested that therapists may want to explore the divine triangle in the marital system of religious couples. The same principle may be effective with spiritually diverse couples. In relationship triangles, couples align in different ways with a third member of the family system to achieve optimum closeness and distance with the greatest freedom from anxiety (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). Butler and Harper defined the following three kinds of triangles that a couple may establish with God: (a) a coalition triangle in which each partner competes for God's allegiance, shunning personal responsibility; (b) a displacement triangle in which one or more partners project responsibility for marital problems onto God; and (c) a substitution triangle in which one or more partners achieve "surrogate intimacy" (p. 5) with God that should be achieved through intimacy with the partner. In all three kinds of triangles, individual responsibility for relationship problems is eschewed, and triangulation with the transitional object of God continues relationship dysfunction. For example, the highly religious partner's closeness to God may invite the less religious partner's distance or hostility toward God, in turn maintaining the emotional status quo of the dyad or of the family. Each partner's triangulation with God may be a necessary response to the

other partner's relationship with God to bring stability to the relationship.

Detriangulation interventions vary according to the type of triangle manifested. For example, in a coalition triangle, in which the highly religious partner conceives that God is on his or her side, Butler and Harper (1994) suggested that the therapist may say to a very religious wife or husband, "From your perspective, it sounds like God is entirely on your side. Do you feel that God may have more understanding and empathy with your wife's/husband's position than you have surmised?" (p. 284). With the displacement triangle, in which the less religious partner may be blaming God for marital discord, the therapist may say, "Are you really angry at God or angry at yourselves [or yourself or your partner] for your marital distress?" (p. 284). With the substitutive triangle, in which the more religious partner is achieving surrogate intimacy with God, the therapist may invite the more religious partner to consider what God's goals for the marriage may be and invite that partner "to consider whether, in the process of building God's Kingdom, God is willing for them [or him or her] to forfeit their marital satisfaction" (p. 284).

Butler and Harper (1994) suggested that either visual imagery or the empty chair technique can be used to aid in detriangulation, just as a therapist may use these techniques to help a client resolve issues with an absent family member. That is, a therapist may help the couple to construct a dialogue with God regarding resolution of their marital issues. Using visual imagery, the couple might picture what God would say to them about their conflicts. In the rare case that the less religious partner is an atheist, the therapist can initiate such interventions with the statement, "For the sake of helping you two find a new solution, if God *did* exist and if She or He wanted your relationship to thrive, then . . ."

Use Spiritual Beliefs, Myths, and Metaphors

Prest and Keller (1993) challenged marriage and family therapists to explore spiritual beliefs, myths, and metaphors that both strengthen the family system and maintain the presenting problem. Because people create their own subjective meanings regarding life's experiences through conversations with others, "so people generate meanings surrounding their spirituality" (p. 140). In spiritually diverse couples, the more religious partner has generated meanings related to religion and to the partner's spirituality or lack thereof, and the less religious partner has generated meanings related to religion and to the more religious partner's spirituality. An open discussion of these meanings, which may manifest as myths, beliefs, and/or metaphors, may make possible the construction of new and more helpful or flexible meanings.

As discussed above, one possible reframe is that the couple has intuitively devised a way to maintain the status quo of their relationship by displacing emotions onto God. Although this may be obviously true (and not simply a reframe), the subtle reframe is that the couple is cleverly colluding to

build and maintain the divine triangle; such a reframe attributes nobility to the accomplishment.

Prest and Keller (1993) also identified strategies for working with both traditional and nontraditional belief systems. These may be applied to spiritually diverse couples in which one partner maintains more traditional beliefs in the following ways:

1. Identify currently practiced solutions to religious differences that have become part of the problem and then help the couple to explore alternative solutions.
2. Elicit fundamental beliefs and attribute different meanings to the metaphors. For example, the rod metaphor in the Bible (Proverbs 13:24) used to justify corporal punishment can be reframed to include time-outs, a solution that may be acceptable to the less religious partner.
3. Initiate a discussion about differences and point out how language affects these differences. For example, with a husband whose religious perspective invests in him the spiritual authority of the home, the therapist can suggest that sacrificial love contributes to effectiveness in the head of the household. Ways to demonstrate sacrificial love may then become a topic of discussion.
4. Use quotations from religious texts that will advance therapeutic change. For example, if one partner is a Christian, the therapist can use Bible quotations that underscore God's ability to enable this partner to love the other as much as God loves them both.
5. The therapist can use his or her own spiritual journey to advance change. For example, the therapist can identify with each partner by speaking of both the times that he or she thought that God answered prayer and other times that he or she wondered if God existed.

With spiritually diverse couples in which one partner holds to more nontraditional spiritual beliefs, Prest and Keller's (1993) suggestions may be applied in the following ways:

1. Suggest that human beings are manifestations of God. If the client believes that God is in all human beings, anger and abuse become more difficult to justify, connections among persons can be enhanced, and the client's self-concept can be improved.
2. Suggest that God is a stream in which all human beings swim. Similar to the belief that God is in all people, this belief lends support for the value of respecting and caring for others, even if their beliefs differ. Partners can then be gently challenged to examine how this perspective could change their treatment of the other.
3. Suggest that God dwells in the dark and in the light, meaning that God is present in times of difficulty and in "up times" (p. 145). This belief may be more of a stretch for a nonreligious partner, but it may be helpful for the therapist to express that God is as much present for a nonreligious partner as for a religious partner.
4. Suggest that clients make friends with their psychological enemies. Each partner could be encouraged to build a bridge to the other in small ways. Furthermore, each partner can be encouraged to make friends with his or her own

anxieties, fears, and other aspects of what can be perceived to be his or her dark sides. The therapist may also initiate a discussion of the fears of each partner related to the religious beliefs or nonbeliefs of their partner. Dogmatism in either belief system can be viewed as the outer layer of the fearful and therefore a more vulnerable aspect of their personality.

5. Suggest that others are more a part of each other than at odds with each other or that each individual is a part of a larger system within which he or she interacts. Therefore, an act of sacrifice for someone else also benefits oneself.

Finally, Genia (1994) suggests that in a dialogue about meanings, use of the word *spiritual*, instead of *religious*, may help the less religious partner to disclose. The assumption is that *religious* implies that traditions and rituals are important to the practice of one's faith, whereas *spiritual* refers to sensitivity to a divine being or force without requiring a commitment to an established religious faith.

Help the Couple to Redefine the Problem

Because couples in counseling sometimes struggle to control the definition of the relationship (Haley, 1963, p. 19), it is important that the therapist not readily accept either partner's definition of the relationship or of the problem. The therapist is well advised to assume that conflict over religious or spiritual differences is likely to be symptomatic of deeper issues that are camouflaged by the bickering over religious issues. To appreciate the truth of this assertion, one need only consider how a highly functioning couple would interact around religious or spiritual differences. Therefore, allowing the couple to define the problem as simply a religious or spiritual one will most likely set the couple up for failure. But helping the couple focus on other dynamics initiates fresh thinking that reduces blame, especially if the problem can be externalized. For instance, the therapist might comment on "that communication problem," "those cultural differences," or "those rules that haven't been working."

In a book written to help Christians who are married to non-Christians, Black (2002) encouraged Christian partners to value the many other aspects in their marriage beyond the spiritual component. She suggested that Christian partners build on the strengths of "the full circle of marriage," which is composed of physical, emotional, volitional, psychological, relational, financial, parental, vocational, recreational, and spiritual components. Therapists might, therefore, engage the couple in dialogue related to these other areas in a search for common beliefs and goals. Therapists can ask, for example, "What kinds of recreational activities have brought you together?" "How have you helped each other to be the best parents you can be?" and "What has worked in your relationship?"

Black (2002) further suggested that Christian partners defocus the religious differences and depend on God as the source of personal strength to build the friendship using all the resources at their disposal (e.g., time, effort, love, deep

sharing, self-sacrifice, encouragement, mental stimulation, loyalty, fun, and spiritual challenge). Spiritual challenge refers to noticing spiritual activities or characteristics of the non-Christian partner and voicing appreciation of them (e.g., express gratitude when the partner shows kindness, forbearance, etc.).

In my practice as a Christian-based therapist, I (Weld) also attempt to defocus religious differences by formulating a definition of the problem using 18 different lenses: individual and couple history, family rules, family roles, power struggles, communication patterns, family structure, personal and family flexibility, family and couple closeness, emotions and needs, patterns of behavior, family-of-origin issues, personal and family stages of development, sociocultural influences, personal and family strengths and weaknesses, spirituality, personality differences, gender-related issues, and sexual history and issues. Because religious or spiritual differences may not present a solvable problem, staying open to the complex forces at work in relationships and families can help the therapist redirect the couple to define the problem in more solvable ways. Clearly, such approaches could be helpful regardless of the faith perspectives of spiritually diverse couples.

Explore Past Solutions, Including Spiritual Ones

One application of solution-focused theory explores the ways in which religious and spiritual values may have helped clients to deal with past difficulties (Standler, Piercy, Mackinnon, & Helmeke, 1994). For instance, the therapist may inquire of the more religious partner how his or her faith has helped, or can help, the relationship with the less religious partner. The therapist may ask what scripture has to say to him or her regarding the religious differences. The less religious partner can be asked similarly, "What has worked in the past to help you two get along in spite of your religious or spiritual differences?" The therapist can then assign homework that involves doing more of what has worked previously.

Promote Development

Dogmatism, or rigid adherence to one's position, will most likely impede the mutual understanding necessary to forward progress in counseling spiritually diverse couples. Dogmatism, whether for or against religion, may, as mentioned above, result from fear. However, it may also reflect a developmental level that finds conflict difficult and dangerous. Constructive developmentalists variously call this stage interpersonal (Kegan, 1982, 1994), multiplicitic (Perry, 1970), synthetic-conventional (Fowler, 1991, 2004), conformist (Loevinger, 1976), conventional (Kohlberg, 1981), or concrete (Piaget, 1954). To reduce dogmatism, counselors actively promote clients' development by providing an environment that optimally matches (supports) and mismatches (challenges) clients' developmental level. Matching implies relating to clients from within their currently dominant way

of knowing, and mismatching clients means relating to them from the next potential way of knowing (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 1999).

To match or support people at the interpersonal level, counselors express appreciation of clients' abilities to form relationships, express feelings, and operate out of intuitive knowledge. They punctuate all of the really beneficial characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes of those in the interpersonal balance (Kegan, 1982, 1994), such as knowing and following the principles of their faith or other societal rules, tuning into others' needs and being loving toward other people, developing quality friendships, and investing in community service activities. Counselors would also give clear direction and a lot of structure, particularly using the authority of scriptures for the more religious partner because those operating out of this stage need an authority-based experience (Kegan, 1982, 1994).

To mismatch or challenge people in this stage to move forward developmentally, counselors urge them to think about why they are doing what they are doing and how they have decided that God wants them to do a particular thing; to examine their inner urges, weigh them, and think carefully about them; to decide whether preserving relationships at all costs is helpful to them (including a specific kind of relationship with their church or to God); to establish a separateness from others' definitions (parents, church members, pastor); and to be self-reflective. Counselors might point more religious clients to conflicting faith mandates and ask them to struggle with finding a resolution (Kegan, 1982, 1994).

CASE ILLUSTRATION

As a means to illustrate some of the suggested strategies, we have designed a case illustration. It is a composite of some of the clients we have seen in practice and some of the strategies we have found to be effective. ("I" represents the therapist without reference to either author.) We have chosen a case in which Christianity is foremost because nearly 80% of Americans identify as Christian (Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001) and because, in our experience, secular counselors struggle most with conservative Christian clients.

Philip and Ruth entered counseling complaining of religious differences that seemed insurmountable and stating that they were ready to divorce. Counseling was their last effort to salvage their marriage, although neither held out much hope. In the initial session, Ruth stated that she had converted to Messianic Judaism several years ago after an adulthood of being a committed Christian. Because Messianic Jews are Jews who believe that the Messiah has come in Christ, they practice many of the Jewish traditions, including worshipping God on Saturdays. Ruth wanted her husband to share her newly acquired faith in God, her new traditions, and her custom of attending church on Saturdays. Ruth stated that without a spiritual connection with her husband, she could not justify staying in the marriage.

Philip said that he loved Ruth but that he was weary of her passionate pleas to go to church. He acknowledged that he believed in God and had previously attended a less conservative church with her but stated that "there's got to be more to our life than God." Philip was also concerned that Ruth's fundamentalism would drive their two children, a 14-year-old boy and a 12-year-old girl, into some sort of dangerous rebellion as the children dreaded attending church on Saturdays and complained to Philip about "Mom's religion."

Spiritual Assessment

At the mention of the children, I asked if I could draw a picture of their family so that I could understand them better. I constructed a genogram, hoping that I could uncover other dynamics and defocus the religious issue. It seems Ruth's deceased parents were atheists. They had met on the mission field, children of parents who had given up their lives to "bring people to Jesus." Her parents had rejected their parents' faith as a result of the hardships of their childhood family life. Ruth felt that because of her parents' lack of faith, she had lived for many years without God, and that because of how dramatically better her life was with God, her desire for her whole family to believe as she did and have a better life was very strong. Philip had grown up in a rather liberal Presbyterian church. Presbyterianism ran through his family for generations. He liked the traditions. He felt comfortable with the relationships he had had through the years in the church. He found comfort in knowing God's presence in the regular rituals of church. It was clear that his faith was of the slow building sort that very clearly gave his life value and purpose, whereas Ruth's represented a dramatic change away from the problems she had experienced without faith.

Therapeutic Alliance

As I listened carefully to their stories, I took care to let each know that I heard their stories and thought their struggles were understandable and justified. For instance, I reflected that I could imagine how much Ruth's faith must mean to her, how her life had changed so much for the better through faith, and how she felt it would be unloving to do anything that would keep her family from experiencing all the benefits she had experienced. I also put myself in Philip's shoes, stating that this was all "really kind of strange for him," stating, "After all, you thought that you shared a Christian faith, you believe in God, you wanted your family to share your faith, but somehow yours isn't turning out to be good enough."

Dynamic Assessment

A number of dynamics became evident as I listened to and watched Philip and Ruth. For instance, whenever I asked them about nonreligious areas of their lives together, they quickly returned to the religious struggle, as though their relationship had been reduced to a struggle over religion. It

also seemed that Philip and Ruth were engaged in a loop about the issue of religion. Ruth took the role of demander, and Philip held the role of withholder, which only seemed to increase Ruth's demands and, subsequently, Philip's withdrawal. Furthermore, the children seemed to have become aligned with Philip and had developed a distant and somewhat hostile relationship with Ruth. Finally, Ruth and Philip had triangulated God into their relationship. That is, they managed the anxiety that arose in their relationship over other issues by bringing in God to struggle over, and this kept them from facing and dealing with the other struggles in their relationship.

Treatment Strategies

Person of the therapist. I believe that successful therapeutic strategies are grounded in the healthy person of the therapist. Furthermore, my own spirituality grounds both my personal and my professional life. It is my *raison d'être*. And so I find that consciously connecting with the ground of my being needs to accompany my connections with clients. My own spirituality is a kind of earth-based Paganism. Given Ruth's conservative faith and Philip's conventionalism, I felt it would be detrimental to share my understandings of faith with them. However, during the session, I consciously maintained a meditative and calm stance, asking the Mother to use me and to work through me. I continued my prayer for them throughout the week, asking the Mother to hold them in her love.

Search for exceptions. I began my interventions by asking Ruth and Philip about their relationship through the years. What had they been attracted to in one another, when had they been happy together, and what had they been doing or been focusing on then? I worked hard to keep them defocused on the religious struggles and focused on the strengths their relationship had experienced previously and the interests they had shared. It became clear that they had always felt passionately about their children. So we invested a good deal of the first session on how they had actualized that passion over the years and what they appreciated about each other's parenting. They had also engaged in a number of social justice projects together, campaigning for children's rights in schools and health care and raising money for less advantaged folks in their community. We spent subsequent sessions focusing on the joys and satisfactions they had experienced together while caring for the less fortunate. Ruth and Philip also indicated that they loved the outdoors and had spent early years camping and backpacking, riding bikes, and walking on the beach. As they told stories of these early activities, the tension seemed less, and some smiles were evident. I gave them the assignment of taking a rest from those discussions that were not working right now, and investing in those conversations and activities that had united them so profoundly in the past. Both could agree that these shared experiences had great value to them both.

The loop. I also helped Ruth and Philip to research how each invited the other into a loop, and we brainstormed together about how to alter their usual ways of approaching one another. Ruth came up with a number of ways to wait for Philip to reach out to her, to do something special for her, to get close to her; she committed to recognize and accept the gifts that Philip had to offer. She was to express appreciation and then record his efforts in a journal without saying anything more about them. Philip considered how he might approach Ruth, caring about who she was, about her faith, and about other things she cared about. If she began to distract him in any way, he was not to say anything about it or give up but was merely to hold his finger to his lips as a signal to her to allow him to care for her.

Clearer boundaries between subsystems. I explained the concept of collusion and explored ways that the mother could fully engage with her children again. I used her religious language to ask (a) how she thought God would want her to love her children and her husband, (b) how she had developed in her faith, and (c) how others had interacted with her to help her to grow. I then asked her to translate these experiences into more kindly and prayerfully approaching her children and her husband, all in the midst of recognizing all of the good things that they already were. She acknowledged that her image of Jesus giving his life on the cross was one she wanted to keep in her heart and mind as she considered how to love her children and her husband. She seemed to then understand that such sacrificial love might be more effective in "growing their faith" than constant haranguing and arguments.

Divine triangle. I placed an empty chair in the room and explained triangles to them. I helped them to see that each time their discussions on other issues became troublesome, they pulled God into the equation and began a battle over religion. I told them that each time this happened, I would stop it, let them know it was happening, and support them in resolving the struggle they were having. Also, we imagined God's presence in the home similarly to having an extended family member living with them for a very long time. I asked them how they would, in those circumstances, ensure that their relationship continued to be strong and rewarding. They brainstormed some ideas.

Development. Similarly to many clients, Ruth and Philip entered counseling at a conventional developmental stage. As noted earlier, promoting their development would require optimally matching and mismatching their stage. To support, match, or recognize the assets of conventional knowing, for instance, I attended to and reflected their caring commitments—to their children, to their church family, and, in the past, to the larger community. I admired the life they had created for themselves and their children and how well they were socializing their children. I supported their expression of their feelings. And I offered them clear directions and a great deal of structure.

However, I also challenged them to think beyond what they had always known, to ask why they believe the way they do, to discover internal reasons for the choices that they make. I frequently asked each of them how they knew what they knew, whether there might be other options, and how they would know these options were right for them.

Closing. Each of these strategies contributed to the rebirth of kindness and care in the relationship. By the fourth session, Ruth and Philip were spending far more of their time in productive activities and conversations with one another and with their children. Understandably, other issues surfaced that had been driven underground by the religious battles. Sexual difficulties and struggles related to both families of origin came to the forefront. During the next months, Ruth and Philip did the hard work of resolving these difficulties. They also focused on accepting each other's imperfections, noticing what the other person did right, and having a date every week or two. Philip and the children agreed to attend church with Ruth as long as home faith practices included only prayer at mealtimes. Mom agreed to conversations with God about her family's spiritual growth rather than with the family members themselves, unless they initiated the conversation.

CONCLUSION

Because spirituality has increasingly become a topic for the therapist's office, marriage and family counselors are well advised, and in fact ethically mandated, to become more knowledgeable about various religious belief systems. Therapists may also find that investing in their own personal growth, which for most therapists includes spiritual growth, assists their work with spiritually diverse couples. This article has suggested a number of techniques and strategies for approaching couples' struggles related to religious or spiritual differences. Perhaps most hopeful about this discussion are the commands for preserving marriage and for avoiding divorce that exist in most major religions. Although the more religious partner may be the one who is most dogmatic about the religious conflicts, he or she will also be the one with the strongest scriptural mandate to preserve the marriage at all costs.

It must be noted that this article has not focused on the rather extensive literature on harmful faith. Harmful faith on the part of the very religious partner may hamper even one's best efforts at applying this article's suggestions and will understandably alienate less religious partners. Lovinger (1996) offered the following 10 indications of "probable religious pathology" (p. 347): self-oriented or narcissistic displays, religion used to gain rewards from God, scrupulosity in avoiding sin or error, relinquishing responsibility for problematic behavior to "the devil" (p. 348), ecstatic frenzy or intense emotionality, persistent church shopping, inappropriate sharing of religious experiences, religiously

inspired "love" that causes pain or confusion, using the Bible to answer "ordinary questions about daily living" (p. 349), and reports of possession by the devil.

Should a very religious partner display such harmful faith, the counselor will need to assist him or her to find more healthy ways of living out his or her faith. For instance, the therapist might help clients develop awareness of complexity and ambiguity in the Bible and faiths more generally, religious affiliation based on a thoughtful decision-making process, value-behavior congruence, recognition of their own shortcomings, and respect for boundaries, all indices of healthy or mature religious adjustment according to Lovinger (1996).

In closing, religious and spiritual beliefs are among those dearest to people's hearts, most difficult to talk about or define, most likely to generate either strongly positive or strongly negative feelings (based on religious or spiritual history), and perhaps most easily threatened in those who are developmentally "conventional"—which includes 80% of the adult population (Kegan, 1982, 1994). As a result, such beliefs may play substantive roles in couple conflicts and cannot be ignored or avoided.

Of course, counselors are not immune from faith experiences similar to those of clients. Furthermore, the conflictual history between faith and the mental health professions, along with counselors' own unexamined or troubling faith histories, may result in some counselors inappropriately relegating faith discussions to the churches and synagogues. We are hoping that the strategies and case discussed here will help to ease the way for counselors to integrate spirituality into the counseling office, as one among many appropriate and needed topics of conversation.

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Chet Weld is affiliated with Renewal Centers in Tucson, Arizona.

Karen Eriksen is a counselor educator at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton.