

Religion & Spirituality at the End of Life

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Outline

- What do we mean by “religion” and “spirituality”?
- What do we know about the intersection between religion & spirituality and the end of life?
- What does the tradition have to say?
- Spiritual pain and healing

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Definitions: Religion

- Webster: *“belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers to be obeyed and worshiped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe; expression of such a belief in conduct and ritual”*
- Operational research definition: *“an organized system of beliefs, practices, and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the transcendent or the Divine and foster an understanding of one’s relationship and responsibilities with others living in community”*

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Definitions: Spirituality

- Webster: *“spiritual character, quality or nature”*
 - Spiritual: *“of the spirit or the soul as distinguished from the body or material matters”*
- US Consensus Conference (2009): *“the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature and to the significant or sacred”*

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Some “definitions” from hospice workers

- A path away from the superficial into the depths
- The journey of the soul
- An awareness of our sacred connection with all of life
- What makes your heart sing

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Jeff’s “definitions”

- Spirituality refers to the interior life, the search for personal identity and how one is related to the cosmos, to the transcendent, to the divine.
- Religion defines, categorizes, and codifies that search and that life, using sacred texts, stories, teachings, and rituals.

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Spirituality & End of Life

- The spiritual...
 - *Seeks answers and meaning*
 - *Yearns for the “peace” in “peaceful death”*
 - *Uniquely personal*
 - *Profoundly difficult to measure*
- So, most research limits questions and measures to “religion” or “religiosity”

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If I (or family member) was critically injured...

<p>How important would your religious beliefs be in guiding decisions about your own medical care if you were critically injured?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Very</i> 41% • <i>Somewhat</i> 26% • <i>Not much</i> 14% • <i>Not at all</i> 19% 	<p>If the doctors treating your family member said futility had been reached, would you believe that divine intervention by God could save your family member?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Yes</i> 57% • <i>No</i> 36%
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Reference: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamasurgery/fullarticle/600800>

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“Positive religious coping”

- The beneficial use of faith in dealing with adversity, particularly illness and death
- Example: “I rely on God’s love and care to get me through times of crisis.”
- Common and generally successful defense or coping strategy
- Usually viewed as a healthy form of psychological adaptation

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Positive religious coping & ICU near death

- Patients with advanced and worsening cancer + spouse/caregiver
 - Interviewed re: how they coped with illness and impending end of life
 - Researchers followed them through the end of their lives (mean = 4mo)
 - After death: review records and interview surviving spouse/caregiver

Reference: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/183578?resultClick=3>

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High level of positive religious coping:

- More likely to
 - Acknowledge their disease was terminal
 - Say their spiritual needs were being supported
- Received intensive care aimed at prolonging life 3x as often
 - (In this population, these treatments add significant symptoms, major expense, and is usually futile)
- Hospice chaplains:
 - The "religious but not too spiritual" suffer the most at end of life

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Who's in Charge?

- Conservative Protestants & those placing great importance on religion/spirituality had lower likelihood of advance care planning
- These associations were largely accounted for by belief that God controls length of life
 - Value of using all available treatments

Reference: <https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/53/5/801/590447>

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What does the tradition teach?

- Afterlife
 - Job 10:20b-22
 - Luke 16:19-25
- Judgment
 - Future
 - What are the criteria for the verdict?
 - Present
 - Proverbs 10:27
 - Ecclesiastes 7:15
 - Luke 13:4-5

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What does the tradition teach?

- Sanctity of life
- Stewardship
 - *Brief statement of faith (PCUSA): "In life and in death we belong to God"*
- Redemptive nature of suffering
- Miracles
- General Convention, "Establish Principles With Regard to the Prolongation of Life"
 - 1991: https://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=1991-A093
 - Revised 1994: https://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=1994-A056
 - Reaffirmed 2009

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Spiritual pain

Samir Selmanovic:

"When we can't fit our life experience into our religion, something has to give, and life can't give."

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Spiritual pain, positive religious coping, and continuing futile medical treatment...

- Common perception of a God who...
 - Determines how long we live
 - Judges us, deciding on our eternal reward or torment
 - Is somehow involved in the pain and suffering we endure
- Hypothetical examples (DWE)

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Spiritual pain: healing

- Religion can inflict pain and provide solace and meaning
- Questions, not answers
- Healing stems from openness to meaning and love that are the goal of the spiritual quest

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Hope

- Fear is the product of brokenness
- Hope is the assurance that, whatever occurs, we will be OK
- Krista Tippett:
 - Hope is "broken-hearted on the way to becoming wholehearted"

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