How Separable are Spirituality and Theology in Psychotherapy?

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We are pleased to respond to Helminiak's thoughtful and complex article

"Treating Spiritual Issues in Secular Psychotherapy" (in press). We are sympathetic to

Helminiak's basic thrust "that spirituality is inherently relevant to psychotherapy" (p. 3)

and agree that a formal conceptualization of spirituality is important to therapy. We view

his article as advancing the conversation about this conceptualization in provocative and

productive ways.

However, like any advance in a relatively new conversation, this article raises as

many issues as it resolves. One of the most difficult issues, in our view, is spirituality's

traditional tie to theology. Specifically, how "independent of, yet open to" religion (p. 2)

is Helminiak's approach to spirituality? He contends that his notion of secular spirituality

is universal and thus neutral to all forms of spirituality, but is it? Helminiak makes a

valiant effort to attain universality and neutrality, but, as we will attempt to show, he

ultimately champions a particular theology and thus a particular spirituality. His effort is

so thorough, however, that it begs the broader question of whether spirituality can be

independent of theology. Certainly, if spirituality cannot be independent of theology,

then many of Helminiak's central propositions must be questioned.

Our purpose, then, is to explore this issue more fully. We first ask the question:

What does Helminiak mean by the independence of his spirituality conception from

religion? Particularly, does such independence imply that his conception avoids positions

and biases that are relevant to the existence and nature of God? To answer these

questions, we first delineate the theoretical assumptions that underlie, but are not completely acknowledged in Helminiak's conception. Then, we examine what implications, if any, these assumptions have for theology. We next explore what these assumptions mean for counselors and the practice of psychotherapy.

What Does Independence of Religion Mean?

At the outset, we are puzzled by Helminiak's claim that his conception of spirituality is "independent of" religion (p. 2). Certainly, in the early portions of his paper he is quite clear about his approach being independent or at least nonsectarian, because it is the "common human core" (p. 6) or "universal mental phenomenon" (p. 2) of all religious and nonreligious conceptions of spirituality. He acknowledges the traditional intimacy of theology and spirituality but proposes a conception of spirituality that is supposedly neutral to and usable by anyone -- counselor or client -- with any theology. From this part of his paper, then, it makes some sense to consider his conception to be "independent of theological [and religious] explanations" (p. 4).

The problem is that he later uses this supposedly neutral conception as the basis for rejecting certain theological conceptions. As he puts it, his psychology of spirituality "provides a basis for criticism of religion and religion's appeal to God" (p. 17) that allows a "transformation of religions and cultures" (p. 17). He not only "validates" certain forms of spirituality that fit his notions but also "reinterprets" and "rejects" certain other forms (p. 28). Literalists and fundamentalists get particularly scathing treatment. They are cast as irresponsible and closed-minded because their theologies (e.g., beliefs in "supernatural powers" and prohibitions of "inner experiences") do not fit the conception that Helminiak proffers.

We are not quite sure what to make of Helminiak's position. On the one hand, he contends that his conception is "universally valid" (p. 17), drawing as it does on the supposed "human core" of spirituality. On the other hand, he uses it to "reject" (p. 23) certain widely held theologies of spirituality. How could his spirituality conception "cut across all religions and cultures" (p. 17), as he holds, yet imply the invalidity of certain religions and cultures? We submit that Helminiak cannot have it both ways.

What, then, is going on here? How could someone with the training and education of Helminiak hold such seemingly contrary positions? We believe that answering this question will aid us greatly in understanding the unstated assumptions of Helminiak's proposal. One major assumption is the attainability of neutrality through a common or universal core of relevant conceptions. That is, he assumes that he can become theologically neutral (impartial, nonpartisan) by excluding those aspects of the various forms of spirituality that differ and retaining those aspects held in common. In the case of spirituality, these exclusions involve primarily theological values and biases. We say "in the case of," because we view this strategy as a variation on a common historical theme.

For many years, at least since the enlightenment, scholars have attempted to attain neutrality through the exclusion of various values and biases (Bernstein, 1983; Slife & Williams, 1998). Scientific method, at least as rendered by the objectivists, is one such historic project. Indeed, many scientists still assume that this method is devoid of biases and values, and thus objective or neutral to the various theories it tests (cf. Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999). Unfortunately, philosophers of science have been quick to note that objectivism is itself a philosophy, with a particular epistemology, ontology, and

metaphysic (Curd & Cover, 1998; Slife & Williams, 1995). This means that certain theories and philosophies are ruled out of scientific investigation -- those considered "unscientific" -- because they do not fit the philosophical biases of method.

But let us bring this strategy of neutrality even closer to home. Counselors have traditionally been taught to view the counseling enterprise similarly. That is, therapists have frequently been trained to keep their values and biases from influencing their treatment and clients. Psychoanalysts are to be blank screens, behaviorists are to be objective, and humanists are to be interpersonal mirrors. Indeed, the ACA (or APA) code of ethics -- while acknowledging the presence of certain values and biases -- encourages counselors to avoid imposing them on clients (ACA, 1995; APA, 1992). Helminiak, in this sense, is merely attempting to follow this ethical mandate.

The problem is that most observers now agree that therapist values are inescapable (e.g., Bergin, 1980; London, 1986). The values of the therapist are generally recognized as not only pervading the therapy session but also inevitably influencing the client (Bergin, Payne, & Richards, 1996; Slife & Reber, in press; Tjeltveit, 1999). A sure sign of therapy difficulty is major value conflicts between clients and counselors. To minimize these conflicts, many counselors attempt to follow the same strategy as the objectivist in science: One handles the differences among subject matters (e.g., clients, theories, theologies) by attempting to find common ground and thus formulating a universal, objective, or neutral position (method, theory). The difficulty, as most in the values literature now agree, is that neutrality is impossible. In fact, the "neutral" position is often used (as with Helminiak) to reject what is unacceptable (e.g., unscientific, close-minded).

Could this be the reason for Helminiak's puzzling position? Could this be the reason that he insists on universality but then rejects many forms of spirituality to which his conception is supposedly universal? Similar to the traditional ideals of objective science and value-free therapy, Helminiak offers the promise of impartiality and nonpartisanship but ultimately cannot fulfill his promise. This fulfillment is prevented because his position contains, like the objectivists before him, unacknowledged assumptions and biases which he then uses to criticize and even reject several mainstream forms of spirituality. Unfortunately, such claims of objectivity, value-free inquiry, and neutrality can contain the worst kind of biases and values, because they influence the enterprise with biases and values that are unrecognized. What unrecognized biases and values underlie Helminiak's enterprise?

What Theory Undergirds His Conception of Spirituality?

Perhaps the first layer to peel off Helminiak's conception of spirituality is the particular theory that undergirds it. If he espouses a particular theory of spirituality, then we can more readily see other biases, perhaps even theological biases. However, it is important to be fair to his complex and sophisticated proposal. After all, he freely admits that values cannot be escaped (pp. 14 - 15), and he gamely incorporates this inescapability into his proposal for a distinctly psychological spirituality. In addition, Helminiak seems to be quite open about his theoretical biases; he makes clear in dozens of places that his proposal is "humanistic."

These admissions are, in part, why his article is so helpful and so provocative. His attempt at neutrality is more subtle and complex than previous attempts. He clearly admits certain values and biases (e.g., the human good), but clearly attempts to strike a

neutral stance regarding others (e.g., religion). In his theory, for example, the reader is never quite sure what he means by "humanistic." In several places, he seems to use the term as a synonym for "human," e.g., the spiritual is "generic human" (p. 27) and "generic humanist" (p. 30). However, if "humanist" means human, then Helminiak is not as forthcoming about his theory as it might first appear. He is, instead, using both terms to mean "human nature" and is thus referring to what is common or neutral to all humans. In this sense, he views himself as not so much asserting a particular theory about spirituality as he is describing what is universally and essentially human.

Still, we do not have to resolve what he means by "humanistic" to see that he is operating from a particular set of assumptions (or biases). Even if he could, Helminiak is not providing a biasless description of human spirituality. He is providing a particular slant on spirituality, as suggested by his humanistic school of thought. This humanistic slant pervades his article. His very interest in the topic of spirituality stems from his particular theoretical perspective. If he were a behaviorist, for instance, it is doubtful that he would even be interested in the topic, at least professionally.

Consider also the tenets of Helminiak's conception of spirituality: self-transcendence (pp. 8, 13), openness (pp. 10, 11, 14, 15, 25), integration (p. 18), growth-orientation (p. 13), self-awareness (p. 16), self-focus (p.21), responsibility (p. 19), authenticity (pp. 10, 21), and congruency (p. 22). Compare these terms and their meanings to the editorial statement and "Five Basic Postulates of Humanistic Psychology" contained in the editorial information of the Journal of Humanistic Psychology. All these terms and their meanings are explicit, if not implicit, in these

statements. There can be no doubt about the theoretical underpinnings of Helminiak's conception of spirituality.

However, Helminiak never states explicitly that he is using a particular school of thought to frame a particular version of spirituality. He, instead, discusses these aspects of his conception as if he were describing what is readily acknowledged (or acknowledgeable) as the "common core" or "universal mental element" of all spirituality approaches. This is not to say that some counselors would not agree with many of these aspects. Still, some agreement is not necessarily impartiality or universality.

Helminiak does discuss the importance of "normative values" (pp. 9-11), and thus one type of commonalty, i.e., what is shared. Nevertheless, an agreement about what is valued does not necessarily imply objectivity or impartiality. Intersubjective agreement is still subjective, and thus is no less a bias and no less a theory, particularly if such an agreement is not universal. This lack of universality becomes abundantly clear when Helminiak draws out the theological implications of his humanistic conception of spirituality. Is it mere coincidence, for instance, that the theological conception he least favors -- fundamentalism -- is the conception that has historically been the most opposed to humanism (Dobson, 1990; Thurston, 2000)? If it is not merely coincidental, is it possible that his theoretical biases have theological implications?

What Theology Undergirds His Conception of Spirituality?

Let us begin to answer these questions by focusing on a major tenet of Helminiak's theory -- openness. (Any one of the other tenets of his spirituality conception, as listed above, could be treated similarly.) Openness or open-mindedness has long been a hallmark of humanistic thinkers (e.g., Rogers, 1951) and is widely

endorsed (i.e., normative) as an important characteristic of good counselors. For his part, Helminiak does not just discuss the need for therapist openness. Like many advocates of openness, he presumes that his clients need to be open-minded as well, particularly as spiritual people (pp. 25 - 26). This means that theologies that reject open-mindedness, "especially the fundamentalist type" (p. 25), should themselves be "rejected" (pp. 23, 25-26). Counselors should at least help these clients to become more open-minded in the name of their spirituality.

Does Helminiak's seemingly reasonable advice about open-mindedness have theological implications and assumptions? We believe that it does. Even helping clients to become more open -- a seemingly innocuous goal -- can be fraught with all sorts of theological issues. If, for instance, Helminiak is correct and fundamentalists "prohibit" (p. 25) openness (which is debatable), then helping such clients to become open-minded is asking them to accept a theology they reject (i.e., asking them to convert). What right does Helminiak have to advocate a different theology when he also claims that counselors should not overstep their bounds regarding theological matters (p. 6)?

Helminiak seems to imply that any reasonable, rational person – presumably apart from theological considerations -- would endorse the open-mindedness that he champions. He appears to believe that "closed-mindedness" on certain theological issues implies irrational dogmatism (pp. 25-26). But is this necessarily true? Many religious people consider certain theological matters "closed," but not in the sense of an irrational and unyielding dogmatism. Rather, certain theological issues are closed because they are the foundation of other beliefs. That is, theological beliefs are sometimes viewed as

different from other beliefs in the sense that they provide the basis from which other values and biases are derived, including the "values" of rationality itself.

From this perspective, theological beliefs cannot be judged as "rational" or "reasonable," because they constitute the foundational premises (or the logical process) for rationality. Logic and rationality only begin once premises and assumptions are available to reason from; these initial premises cannot be reasoned to (or be rational in themselves) because they start and even define the process of rationality. If theological beliefs truly function in this capacity, one cannot act or even think rationally until one has "closed" the matter with a theological "leap of faith" (cf. Kierkegaard, 1843/1995; MacIntyre, 1981). (One might wonder if Helminiak is close-minded, in this sense, on the issue of open-mindedness.) Admittedly, this view of theological beliefs is not the only one available, and surely, Helminiak would take issue with it, but again, what makes his own view the more correct?

Can Science Indicate the Correct Spiritual Conception?

A large part of Helminiak's confidence in his view appears to come from his faith in science.[1] As he envisions it, religions and cultures would undergo a "transformation" "on the basis of empirically validated insight" into spirituality (p. 17). As he further explains, "Even as the deployment of other sciences has allowed for the purification and correction of religious beliefs -- astronomy, geology, medicine, psychiatry -- so a psychology of spirituality can react back on religion" (p. 17).

Clearly, then, Helminiak is counting on another supposed neutrality -- science -- to show why his particular conception of spirituality is the more correct (e.g., research on open-mindedness). We say "another supposed neutrality" because we wish to note that

his appeal to science is merely a recapitulation of the strategy we are disputing – the strategy of neutrality. Merely moving the location of the strategy from the realm of the theological to the realm of the scientific does not address our criticisms of the strategy itself (i.e., that Helminiak is not impartial or nonpartisan; he is using a theology to evaluate other theologies.)

However, we are not naive enough to think that we can leave the matter there. Science has long been used in just this way -- to settle disputes among ideas, as if the scientific method were itself neutral and objective to the ideas. We must then ask the question: How impartial is this scientific foundation for doing what Helminiak advocates -- "reacting back" and "transforming" religion and theology (p. 17)? As one of the present authors has shown in another article (Slife, Hope, and Nebeker, 1999), it is not impartial at all. In fact, a thorough understanding of the philosophy underlying traditional science reveals a host of assumptions that Slife et al (1999) have shown to conflict with the assumptions of many spiritual researchers, let alone the theological assumptions of many religious people.

Most scientists unconsciously affirm a naturalistic theology, with three assumptions -- universalism, materialism, and atomism -- figuring prominently (Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999). These assumptions are readily evidenced in the practices of scientists, including replication, operationalism, and reductionism (Slife et al., 1999). These practices are not themselves scientifically validated requirements. That is, there is no empirical evidence for empiricism and naturalism. These practices are instead affirmed (through a "leap of faith") <u>before</u> empirical investigation can even begin. Hence, they can only be philosophically (or theologically) derived, and as Slife et al. (1999) have

shown, these pre-investigatory assumptions do not fit the assumptions of many

mainstream researchers about spirituality -- e.g., transcendence, holism, and

contextuality.

In this sense, then, there is no scientific neutrality. Science was invented by

philosophers with particular philosophical axes to grind. Helminiak's appeal to science is

not an appeal to a transparent window that reveals the correctness of particular theories

(and theologies), in this case humanism and open-mindedness. Helminiak's appeal is to a

meta-theory (philosophy of science) that is commonly used to evaluate other theories. Its

common use is undeniable, but again its common use does not mean that it is impartial in

this dispute. Indeed, its naturalistic theological basis is likely to conflict with many

religious theologies because they are not naturalistic (Richards & Bergin, 1997; Slife,

1999b; Slife & Reber, in press). In fact, with the theological biases of science revealed,

one could easily predict that many results of traditional scientific methods would dispute

the "results" of certain religious beliefs, because the orienting assumptions of this method

contradict the orienting assumptions of many religious people, before any investigation

has occurred.

Is Helminiak's Conception "Open to" Our Own Spirituality?

Another important and revealing test of Helminiak's claim of "independence

from" and "openness to" different theologies consists of answering the following

question: Do those who believe in spirituality, and spirituality's relevance to therapy, see

their spirituality reflected in Helminiak's conception? For the present authors, this answer

is in the negative. We should be clear that neither of us is fundamentalist, at least given

conventional definitions. One of us is mainstream Protestant (Slife) and the other is

Latter-day Saint (Richards). We mention our theological positions for two reasons: one, to clarify our own theological biases, and two, to show that more than a defense of fundamentalism is at stake here. That is, we never recognized <u>our own</u> spirituality as we read Helminiak's conception. His humanistic conception results in many theological implications that do not match, indeed that seem to contradict, many of our own theological beliefs as well as our own sense of spirituality.

We wonder if this mismatch is inevitable, given the diverse and in some cases incommensurable theologies and spiritualities available. Universal and common elements of spirituality are only possible if one assumes that the various components of spiritual positions are related atomistically. Helminiak assumes this atomism (without acknowledgement) when he excludes the components that differ, and then treats the remaining components of spiritual positions as though they do not draw their original meaning from the components excluded. In other words, Helminiak assumes that these components exist as "atoms," with all their properties and characteristics <u>self-contained</u>, so that when some components are excluded, the remaining components are unaffected. Unfortunately, the mismatch we experience with Helminiak's conception prompts us to question this atomism. That is, some of the components he has excluded from our position seem to give meaning to the ones that remain.

Consider holism as a contrasting assumption. Holism implies that all (or most) of the components of a theoretical (or theological) position are intimately and vitally related. The properties and qualities of each component stem, at least to some vital degree, from its relation to the other components. For instance, many theists, such as ourselves, view the god component of spiritual conceptions as a vital part of the whole. Although

Helminiak contends that his conception is "open to" such spiritual positions, our strong impression in reading his proposal is that this contention is false. We understand his wish to be more inclusive, bringing together theists and nontheists alike. However, his only choice for effecting this inclusiveness -- given his strategy of neutrality and commonalty -- is to exclude God and any concepts related to God, because nontheists do not embrace these concepts.

The problem is that our particular spirituality only makes sense to us in light of the agent of this spirit. To exclude God, in this case, is to exclude spirituality. Helminiak can reframe spirituality as the "mental phenomenon" we use to understand spirituality, if he chooses, but this phenomenon has no relationship to what we originally understood our spirituality to be. Part of the reason it has no relationship is because a god-filled and god-less world are qualitatively different from one another. For some time now, secular thinkers have assumed that the exclusion of god (and theology) is a way to neutralize their conceptions, allowing anyone, supposedly, to add on their particular theological precepts. Many modern conceptions of the mind make this assumption, postulating cognitive mechanisms that work without God's aid.

However, this "add on" strategy is atomistic. That is, it presumes that secular and theological positions are self-contained, independent of one another, and essentially compatible. Holism, however, assumes that a world without a god and a world with a god could be qualitatively different and thus incompatible worlds. A world without a god requires structures and mechanisms (e.g., mental mechanisms) other than God to explain the events of the world. These structures and mechanisms cannot be God, in principle, so they must operate in an entirely different manner than God. The most common

explanation of this operation is naturalism, i.e., natural laws that govern the god-less world.

Unfortunately, most theistic conceptions cannot be "added on" to this god-less world without considerable disruption. This is because god-less natural laws work automatically and independently of God. Only a completely passive and apathetic God is conceivable in this world, because God would not disrupt the autonomous and predictable laws that govern the world. However, an active and intervening God (e.g., Christianity) would be vitally involved in many, if not all, world events. God would be necessary to explain and understand these events, including mental phenomena. God-less conceptions, such as that offered by Helminiak, could not, in principle, explain or subsume god-filled conceptions, such as our own. Moreover, no god-less conception can be a part of our conception because all parts of our conception (including the mind) are united by and vitally dependent on a part that Helminiak has scrupulously excluded -- God.

Does Helminiak's exclusion of God make his position nontheological? Theology is, as Webster puts it, the study of God and God's relation to the universe. This means that Helminiak's assumption of God's passive nature (or His nonexistence) is a theological position, because it takes an explicit position on God (passive or nonexistent) and an implicit position on His relation to the universe. In the latter case, the lack of a meaningful relationship (to the universe) is still a position on that relationship. Further, the naturalistic "structures, processes, and mechanisms" (p. 7) that Helminiak postulates as a substitute for God's action in the world are all implications of this theological position. Because Helminiak assumes that God does not help such structures work, they

must work on their own. Therefore, we cannot presume that autonomous structures and mechanisms are independent of theology, as he claims, because their autonomy requires implicit assumptions about the role of God in the universe.

Do Theological Differences Mean Practical Differences?

Do the differences in our theological positions -- Helminiak's and our own -- have practical implications? Many therapists have assumed, we think incorrectly, that theologies are abstractions that have no everyday consequences, particularly therapeutic consequences. One of the strengths of Helminiak's paper is its exploration of the therapeutic implications of his spirituality conception, particularly in the latter sections of his article. We would like now to consider some of these implications and show how they differ, depending on one's theology.

In therapy, for instance, Helminiak has difficulties with religious clients who believe in "supernatural powers" (p. 23). This difficulty is completely understandable in view of his naturalistic theology. Any naturalistic thinker would have trouble with powers and explanations that postulate "super" natural (or beyond natural) forces, by definition. However, as we have shown, this naturalistic theology does not mean that his position is impartial to or "independent of" theology in general (p.2). His theology is a particular assertion about the existence, relevance, and activity of God. Consequently, a counselor with Helminiak's approach has a particular theological and thus therapeutic perspective. His position on supernatural powers is an indication of this perspective.

How well does this theological perspective work with theistic clients? How can Helminiak's conception of spirituality be open to these clients, as he claims? After all, he holds that counselors should reject and correct theologies involving supernatural powers

such as God. Our difficulty is: How can a therapist "reject outright" (p. 23) belief in such powers and be open to them at the same time? Helminiak warns us that "the danger in such [supernatural] belief is that it eschews personal responsibility" (p. 23). We can see how this would seem to encourage irresponsibility from Helminiak's humanistic and naturalistic perspective. However, from the perspective of a believer in an active God, God is responsible for some things. Therefore, Helminiak's conception of spirituality -- and thus the counselor who holds it – cannot be open to this client on certain issues of responsibility.

A corollary therapeutic and theological problem occurs when Helminiak reveals the "fundamental shift in worldview, philosophy, belief, religion" that his conception of spirituality implies for clients. This "shift," as he describes it, is from an "external authority" to an "internal process" -- the internal process of humanistic authenticity (p. 21). Again, the problem is that many clients do not share this humanistic theology. They are striving with all their being to rely on an "external source" in Helminiak's view -- God. (We count ourselves among this number.)

We understand why naturalistic theologians would view this reliance as potentially pathological. The irrelevance of God from their perspective would naturally imply the irrelevance of such "external" sources. Still, with this perspective correctly understood as theological (or at least having important theological implications), it is easy to see why it has no better claim to legitimacy and correctness than any other theology. We are aware that many with this perspective would appeal to scientific evidence to support their view.[2] However, what counts as evidence is part of this dispute. Many non-naturalistic theologians would appeal to other sources of evidence (e.g., revelation) to

support their view. In either case, the appeal is made to another conception that is itself

steeped in theological assumptions and implications, so neither appeal allows us to escape

a theological grounding for the issues.

As a last example of the practical differences between theologies, consider his

contention that no one can know what God is. We are relegated, according to Helminiak,

to "project onto God our own understandings . . . which can be made out to be whatever

one might wish" (p. 16). God, in this sense, is "really social constructions," and moral

requirements "can be sorted out from their association from God" (p. 21). From

Helminiak's perspective, a client's construction of God can be useful "to insist that moral

requirements are important," but moral values are ultimately constructions of society.

They can be "valid" moral norms (p. 21). However, this validity stems not from any

revealed truth about God, but from societal agreement.

Here we believe Helminiak has taken the mystery of God too far, at least for many

theistic clients. Granted, one may not be able to fully articulate who or what God is, but

the lack of a <u>full</u> articulation does not mean the lack of <u>any</u> articulation, or that God is

merely a social construction. Many religious people believe that God has been revealed --

sometimes in the most dramatic of ways -- to be loving, good, and redeeming. Moreover,

as C. S. Lewis notes, the irreducibility (or lack of full articulability) of God <u>is</u> one of

God's characteristics (Slife, 1999a); God would not be God if we could wrap our minds

around Him totally. (Considering God to be God in spite of this irreducibility is one of

the functions of faith.) Even so, such irreducibility does not imply that these

characteristics of God are merely projections or constructions, or that some revelation has

not occurred.

Again, we are befuddled by Helminiak's therapeutic position in this regard. How is a social constructionist position on God (and moral values) "open to" theistic clients? How is it compatible, for instance, with a belief in a personal and communal <u>revelation</u>? We wonder if we represent many counselors and clients in recognizing none of our own sense of spirituality in Helminiak's assertions. Moreover, we do not believe that he can "get there from here." In other words, he cannot move from a god that is a projection of "whatever one might wish" -- a god-less explanation -- to a God that is real and constantly involved -- a God-filled explanation. How, then, can counselors with Helminiak's conception of spirituality "move to" a client with our theistic conception of spirituality? Would not extensive difficulties in communication and empathy be inevitable?

<u>Does Helminiak's Approach Effectively Handle Professional Issues?</u>

These questions indicate the close tie between conceptual and professional issues. At this juncture, we have revealed clear conceptual problems with Helminiak's proposal. Do these conceptual problems influence important applied and professional issues as well? We believe they do. To demonstrate and clarify this influence, we explore the implications of these conceptual problems for five pivotal, professional issues.

<u>Boundary Concerns</u>. Helminiak's approach to resolving questions about appropriate boundaries between counselors and religious leaders is to say that therapists should "avoid issues of religion and theism while still respecting them . . . for matters of God fall to the domain of religion, and matters of religion fall to clergy and theologians" (p. 6). Helminiak claims that his approach avoids boundary violations by excluding matters of religion and God (i.e., the strategy of neutrality). As we have shown, however, Helminiak's humanistic "theology" does not succeed at avoiding matters of religion and

God. In fact, he takes a rather strident position on all sorts of important theological questions, including the relevance of God in our lives, the nature of the human spirit and spirituality, the qualities of a good life.

By promoting a particular theology, while claiming that he is not, Helminiak actually increases the risk that he will violate professional role boundaries. Without some awareness of his own theological stance, he enhances the possibility that he will unwittingly invade a domain that rightly belongs to religious leaders – those with the responsibility of authoritatively declaring and teaching theological doctrines (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Helminiak and other counselors who accept his approach run the risk of setting themselves up as "doctrinal authorities" as they present (and promote) their humanistic theology under the guise of the "human spirit" or the "human core of spirituality." In doing so, they run the risk of client subversion and coercion, and of potentially usurping and undermining the authority of religious leaders (Richards & Bergin, 1997).

We suggest the following as an alternative approach to handling boundary issues: (1) openly acknowledge to clients that their approach to psychotherapy contains theological assumptions and implications; (2) emphasize to clients that they (the therapists) are not religious authorities and have no right to authoritatively teach theological doctrine; (3) acknowledge the rights (and duty) of clients to disagree with the counselor's theological views; and (4) encourage clients to seek counsel from their religious leaders if they have theological questions or concerns (Richards & Bergin, 1997).

Relationship Establishment Issues. It is now widely recognized that many

religious people distrust secular (nonreligious) counselors. Religious people frequently

prefer to seek assistance from their own clergy rather than professional counselors

(Richards & Bergin, 1997, 2000; Worthington, 1986). Even when religious clients are

willing to work with secular counselors, it is often a major therapeutic challenge for such

counselors to establish a relationship of trust and credibility (Richards & Bergin, 1997,

2000; Slife & Reber, in press). Helminiak seems to believe that his humanistic

framework for spirituality overcomes this challenge. Indeed, if Helminiak's humanistic

spirituality helps nonreligious counselors more fully understand and respect the

importance of spiritual beliefs and influences in human functioning and healing, then his

approach will have resulted in important benefits.

On the other hand, Helminiak's humanistic spirituality seems to marginalize core

theistic beliefs about spirituality (e.g., the belief in a personal God, the importance of

one's relationship with God). Although he does not appear to recognize this

marginalization – indeed, he claims to be tolerant of theistic beliefs – we predict that

many of his theistic clients will sense this marginalization nevertheless and feel

pathologized. Such feelings could undermine the trust and credibility necessary for truly

effective therapeutic work.

If, by contrast, Helminiak accepted that his humanistic spirituality was not fully

congenial with a theistic worldview, he might be in a better position to recognize and

avoid messages that could marginalize the beliefs of his theistic clients, and thereby enjoy

more success at building trusting, credible relationships. Given the virtual inevitability of

value differences of one sort or another, we believe that the open, explicit, and respectful

acknowledgement of these differences would do more to build trust and credibility than any attempt at neutrality.

Avoiding Values Imposition. The ethical guidelines of the mental health professions urge their members to respect value differences and avoid value imposition (ACA, 1995; APA, 1992). Some professionals have expressed concerns that counselors who use spiritual therapy approaches may be especially prone to violate this ethic (Seligman, 1988), though others have argued that they may be less prone (Richards & Bergin, 1997). We fear that therapists who accept Helminiak's framework will be at significant risk for engaging in values imposition, however unknowingly. The values literature seems quite clear that therapists cannot escape whatever values they have and will inevitably attempt to use those values to influence their clients. Their only ethical course of action is to make themselves aware of these values and use this knowledge to inform their clients.

Although Helminiak does acknowledge that his approach to therapy is "far from value-free" (p. 11), he nevertheless views these values as neutral or universal. As we have noted, he claims they are "found . . . in every individual," have "some universal validity" or "inherent normativity," and are a "requirement of the human spirit" (pp. 11-14). Unfortunately, as we have also shown, the values Helminiak endorses are not neutral, and it is questionable whether they are universal. Indeed, most of the clients he will meet hold some version of theism (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Thus, Helminiak and those who use his approach will likely encounter clients who do not fully agree with their values. Without explicit knowledge of the theological implications of their own position, these counselors will likely impart their unrecognized theology as though it is universal

and objective truth. In theological terms, they will attempt to convert their clients to their own theology in the name of scientific truth.

We believe that there is another, more ethical way to proceed. Risks of value imposition can be lessened with a few simple recommendations: (1) counselors must acknowledge that not all clients will or should accept their values; (2) counselors should do their best (and be trained to do their best) to explicate their values, including their theological values, during therapy; (3) counselors need to emphasize that their clients have the right to disagree with them; and 4) counselors should see such disagreement as a potentially productive part of the therapy interaction (Bergin, 1985; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Richards, Rector, & Tjeltveit, 1999). This approach acknowledges the inevitability of counselor influence on clients, but decreases the likelihood that inappropriate "values imposition" will occur.

Helminiak's approach fails on all four counts. First, the supposed universality of his values means that he will not allow (or know to allow) his clients to question or discuss them. Second, Helminiak says nothing about the importance of being explicit about his theological values, because he appears not to know or recognize he has these values. Third, he cannot encourage client disagreement with his values when he argues that such disagreement actually proves his values' validity (pp. 11, 29). And fourth, Helminiak fails to develop or even mention the therapeutic opportunities involved in disagreement. We find such a position worrisome.

Diagnostic and Assessment Questions. A challenging question facing anyone who proposes a spiritual framework for psychotherapy concerns what criteria and values will be used to evaluate the health and maturity of a client's spiritual beliefs. Numerous

models of spiritual health and maturity have been proposed and yet there is no agreement about which models are the most valid or helpful (Richards & Bergin, 1997). How then are therapists to proceed with diagnosis and assessment in the religious and spiritual domain? Helminiak seems to acknowledge this difficulty when he writes, "And if it is not the role of therapists to assess the psychological adequacy of religious beliefs, how can therapists presume to know what might be healthy or unhealthy in any case" (p. 14)?

How are therapists to address this issue? Helminiak addresses it by describing humanistic values and criteria for assessing the health and maturity of a client's religious beliefs. A client's religious beliefs should be authentic, open-minded, honest, questioning, and good-willed. Religious beliefs that do not fit these criteria would, according to Helminiak's framework, be deemed unhealthy and immature, and thus, reinterpreted or rejected (p. 19-27). Why these criteria? Again, Helminiak asserts the universality and normativity of these values, but provides no demonstration or justification of this assertion.

This assertion only makes it seem as if the assessment issue is resolved, when it is very much alive, and may remain alive, in principle. This aliveness is the reason we believe counselors should explicitly and humbly acknowledge (to themselves and their clients) the theological biases that influence, and may even ground, their diagnostic and assessment frameworks. Clients can then be invited to participate with the counselor in deciding whether the assessment framework seems valid and helpful. Such participation may also reduce the risk that theologically unfair assessment criteria are being used in evaluating clients' spiritual maturity and health.

Spiritual Goals and Interventions. Another challenging issue for a spiritual approach to psychotherapy concerns what spiritual goals and interventions are appropriate to pursue, particularly when the client's religious beliefs differ from the therapist's. Helminiak claims his humanistic framework avoids such differences by establishing the common ground of all spiritual conceptions. However, as we have noted, his humanistic spiritual framework seems to conflict with and marginalize core theistic beliefs. Consequently, we have questioned whether a counselor with Helminiak's approach truly would be open to theistic clients.

Unfortunately, we must also question whether this framework can lead to therapeutic goals and interventions that affirm theistic conceptions of spiritual growth and well-being. For instance, a mature and healthy spirituality, according to many theistic perspectives, includes engaging in a relationship with God, seeking and obtaining spiritual guidance, and finding an appropriate harmony between one's own will (inner experience) and God's will (external authority). Even if Helminiak's approach tolerates, in some sense, a client's faith in God, it does little to actively nurture and develop it.

Helminiak's approach would, instead, encourage theistic clients to give priority to their inner feelings and experiences, and devalue or perhaps even ignore entirely their beliefs about God's will for their lives. Helminiak makes clear that inner experience is the most authoritative guide in matters of what is "true, right, good, and wholesome" (p. 10). Thus, by privileging the humanistic view of spirituality (and not acknowledging this privilege), Helminiak increases the risk of counselors pursuing spiritual goals and interventions that conflict with theistic clients' spiritual beliefs and well-being.

To formulate an effective and ethical alternative, awareness and interaction about the theological underpinnings of spiritual goals and interventions can be a key, with counselors openly and respectfully sharing and processing these goals with their clients. Part of informed consent could include a discussion about the theological assumptions of a counselor's approach. Clients should be given the opportunity not only to consent to spiritual goals and interventions but also to negotiate and explore the theological and religious differences encountered (Richards & Bergin, 1997).

Putting It Together

Theological issues are crucial aspects of the practical domain. Broadly defined, theological assumptions are often, if not always, the bedrock of practical values, theories, and methods (Slife & Reber, in press). How could they help but pervade and infuse the therapy session, at least implicitly? As we have shown, theological positions have implications for responsibility, worldview, authority, moral values, communication, general openness to the sensibilities and positions of clients, as well as professional concerns such as boundary issues, relationship establishment, values imposition, diagnosis, and therapy goals. If some clients embrace a God-filled world, and the therapist embraces Helminiak's god-less world, then bridging these incommensurable worlds will be a considerable challenge. Moreover, therapists may be tempted to change the theology of their clients, without recognizing their own implicit theological position in doing so.

Helminiak seems to claim that his secular position is superior (e.g., more universal, more rational, more scientific). However, any claims of superiority miss the point. Helminiak can only claim superiority by way of competing assumptions, which are

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themselves related to, if not founded upon, a theology. We are amused by his contention

that any disagreement with him is ipso facto an agreement. As we stated at the outset, we

have no problems with viewing ourselves as part of a conversation with Helminiak and

others. Indeed, we highly value his participation in this conversation. However, we

cannot disagree more with his proposal. We believe his entire strategy of impartiality and

neutrality to be not only doomed to failure but also misleading and counterproductive.

We also recognize that our beliefs in this regard are influenced by our own theology.

Indeed, this recognition raises very provocative questions for our conversation to

consider: Can spiritual conceptions be devoid of theology? Do conceptions of

spirituality _have_ to stake out a position on God? After all, to assume that God does not

exist, or even that the issue of God's existence is irrelevant, is to have a different spiritual

position from someone who assumes that God _does_ exist and God's existence _is_ relevant.

Is theology, in this broad sense, truly inescapable, much like epistemological values and

therapeutic values are now considered inescapable in science and therapy? If theology _is_

inescapable, then an approach to therapy other than Helminiak's strategy of universality is

implied for those who value spirituality. Indeed, if all theories have theological

implications, then even the nonspiritually oriented counselor must consider the issue of

theological assumptions.

Implications of this tentative conclusion are far-reaching: One cannot avoid

theology; one can only choose the particular theology one has. This means that

counselors are thrust into the seeming paradox of requiring an expertise in theology when

it is not their expertise. But should we be surprised by this requirement? The ancient

atomism/holism dilemma is merely being redressed here in modern garb. Does not the

desire to treat the "whole person" lead to this paradox? Is the only resolution of this

paradox to remain within our particular part of the whole -- psychology -- and exclude

other parts such as theology and religion (not to mention biology, sociology, and

philosophy)? Have we ever <u>really</u> been able to do this? Or, is there another solution that

allows us to recognize that our part (our expertise) gets some of its qualities from its

relation to other parts, in which case some sense of another's expertise has always been

necessary to understand our own.

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[1] This is not contrary to Helminiak's humanism. Many humanists in the past (Rogers, 1961) and the present (Rychlak, 1988) have made explicit their endorsement of science.
[2] As we have shown, however, this appeal is made to a conception (science) that has its own theological assumptions and implications (cf. Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999).