Do Christian Concepts and Principles Have a Place in Academia? A Case Study in Integration

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Abstract

Australian psychologists have sometimes been reluctant to incorporate religious issues into their teaching. While the reasons for this reluctance are sometimes well-founded (e.g., a desire not to impose religious values on students), the omission of religious content can also have negative consequences (e.g., inadequate preparation of psychology graduates to deal with faith issues that arise in therapy). In this paper, it will be argued that religious issues can be successfully integrated into the teaching of psychology, provided certain safeguards are met. In particular, a case study will be provided of a course entitled "Religious Issues in Counselling" that was successfully taught in a psychology department at a secular university over a five-year period. As census figures indicate that Christianity is the main religion endorsed by Australians, Christian concepts and principles made up the bulk of that course and will be the main focus of this paper. The advantages and challenges associated with teaching such a course will be outlined, and future directions and implications for the teaching of psychology will be considered.

In the United States, there are a number of psychology programs accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA) that specifically integrate Christian concepts and principles with psychology training (e.g., the doctoral programs at Fuller Theological Seminary and Rosemead School of Psychology) (Johnson & McMinn, 2003). While there are some programs in Australia that integrate Christian principles with training in counselling (e.g., Christian Heritage College and Tabor College), there are currently no integrative psychology programs accredited by the Australian Psychological Society (APS). Is there a place for such programs? Indeed, is there a place at all for Christian concepts and principles in the training of psychologists?

Reasons for Reluctance

There are a number of reasons why academics have been reluctant to incorporate religious or spiritual content into psychology programs. First, there can be valid concerns about not wanting to impose religious or spiritual beliefs on students and clients. However, this does not imply that religious or spiritual issues can never be raised. As I argued in an earlier article (Passmore, 2003), counselling is not value-free. Our worldview, be it a religious or spiritual worldview, a political worldview, or some other framework for living, affects how we view human behaviour, the models and theories we adopt, and the techniques we employ. As Hage (2006) notes, "psychologists have a responsibility to carefully monitor themselves to make sure they avoid imposing their values on clients"; however, "this recommendation also applies to therapists who exclude spiritual issues from therapy, for they are equally in danger of imposing secular values on clients" (p. 307).

A second major reason for a reluctance to incorporate religious issues into psychology programs is the lack of resources and training available in the area. In one study, 98 directors of APA-accredited clinical training programs were surveyed regarding the extent to which religious or spiritual issues were covered in the training offered to their students (Brawer, Handal, Fabricatore, Roberts, & Wajda-Johnston, 2002). Only 17% of directors indicated that there was systematic coverage of these topics in their programs through coursework, research, and supervision, though 61% did note that it was covered within a course such as cross-cultural psychology. In a recent Australian study of 104 registered psychologists, Fattal (2007) found that only 27% of participants had received instruction in dealing with religious or spiritual issues as part of their university training (e.g., within coursework or supervision). While there are many recently published scholarly journal articles and books regarding the integration of psychology with religious or spiritual issues, there seems to be a gap between the publication of such materials and the adaptation of these resources into actual training materials (Russell & Yarhouse, 2006).

Reasons for Inclusion

According to the APS Code of Ethics, psychologists must not practice outside of their areas of competence. Rather than being in danger of imposing our religious or spiritual values on students, I believe we are actually doing our students a disservice if we do not adequately prepare them to competently deal with matters of faith that may arise in therapy. While Australia is often thought of as a secular country, census figures still confirm that the majority of Australians do have a

religious affiliation. According to Trewin (2007), 68% of Australians are affiliated with a Christian denomination; while 4.9% are affiliated with another religion such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Judaism. In addition, there would be others who do not necessarily align with a particular religion, yet still regard their own spirituality as important (Passmore, 2003). Given the prevalence of religious or spiritual beliefs, such issues are bound to come up in counselling situations from time to time. A psychologist who has received little or no training in religious or spiritual issues, may be unsure of what to do in such situations. While such issues can be addressed in supervision, the supervisors themselves may also lack specific training in how to best deal with such issues.

Second, religion and spirituality are important diversity issues, and as such, should be addressed in training. In its standards for accreditation of psychology programs, the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC; 2007, p. 26) includes "intercultural diversity and indigenous psychology" as one of the core topics that must be covered in undergraduate programs. The APAC guidelines also state that all coursework Masters and Doctoral programs should include training in "intercultural and ethnic issues; working with indigenous groups" (pp. 35, 42). While multicultural issues of race and ethnicity are often seen as relevant topics in such courses, the importance of religious diversity can sometimes be underplayed. However, it is important that psychologists also understand how a person's religious beliefs could affect his or her attitudes, thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and well-being.

Third, psychologists need to understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy religious beliefs and/or practices. Healthy religious commitments have been positively associated with various mental health and well-being indicators (e.g., Plante & Sharma, 2001). As Hage (2006) notes, "trainees lacking knowledge of research on the role of spirituality and religion in health may inappropriately disregard significant aspects of their clients' spiritual or religious background that could provide therapeutic benefit" (p. 303). It is just as important that psychologists be able to discern possible negative effects of unhealthy religious beliefs and experiences. Numerous cases show the negative effects of involvement with cults (e.g., Jim Jones and the People's Temple, Joseph Kibwetere and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God). There have also been cases of religious abuse of children, such as the denial of essential medical treatment on the basis of religious beliefs or abuse by religious clergy (Bottoms, Shaver, Goodman, & Qin, 1995). Thus, psychologists need to be aware of both the positive and negative effects of religion.

What Would Integration Look Like?

Yarhouse and Fisher (2002) reviewed three different models for the training of psychologists to deal with religious or spiritual issues. In the *Religious Distinctive Model*, entire degrees are offered in which a particular religious tradition is integrated with psychology training. At the time of writing their article, Johnson and McMinn (2003) noted that four such integrative programs had full accreditation with the APA (i.e., Fuller Theological Seminary, Rosemead School of Psychology, George Fox University, and Wheaton College). However, they also noted that obtaining and maintaining APA accreditation had not always been easy. The difficulties in having similar programs accreditated by APAC may prove a barrier to the development of such programs for the training of psychologists in Australia. While the development of such programs is certainly a goal for the future, it may not be a short-term solution to the lack of training of current students and graduates in terms of religious/spiritual issues.

A second training option is the *Certificate-Minor Model* (Yarhouse & Fisher, 2002). Within this model, streams could be developed that allow students to pursue studies in the area of religiosity or spirituality. Within the Australian context, for example, students could undertake electives in religious issues. If such electives were not available at the host university, students could enrol in cross-institutional subjects at places such as Christian Heritage College where Christian values and principles are integrated with training in counselling. Students may also be able to gain exemptions for electives at their own universities by completing appropriate courses of study in youth work or chaplaincy. For example, Scripture Union offers an accredited Certificate IV and Diploma in Youth Work, which would be relevant for psychology students who are interested in school chaplaincy. While there are advantages of this model, one problem is that "it may lead some to believe that only those who complete the minor need to be concerned with the topic of religion and spirituality" (Yarhouse & Fisher, 2002, p. 174). Rather, it is important for all psychologists to be aware of such issues.

Yarhouse and Fisher's (2002) third strategy, the *Integration-Incorporation Model*, is probably the easiest to implement, as it involves the inclusion of information about religion or spirituality within existing curricula. A specific elective could be offered, but information could also be incorporated into existing courses such as multicultural studies or ethics. I have had the opportunity to apply this model in my own

teaching, and that topic is the subject of the next section.

A Case Study in Integration

In my own department, we used to have a generic course entitled "Special Topics in Psychology", and staff could run particular topics under that banner that were not part of the usual curriculum. In 1998, I ran a subject within that course entitled "Issues in Christian Counselling". The course was enthusiastically received by the students. However, at the end of that year, a colleague raised concerns that it might discriminate against students who did not have a Christian background. Although I did not believe this was the case, I consulted one of the equal opportunity officers at the university, and she advised that students of other faiths may be disadvantaged if they wanted to do a subject that allowed them to integrate their faith with their psychology studies, yet found that only the Christian course was available to them. After consultation with a number of people, I changed the course to "Religious Issues in Counselling", and it ran for another four years. At first, I was reluctant to make this change, but I came to see that it did improve the course. As Christianity is still the main religion in Australia, with 68% of the population acknowledging a Christian affiliation (Trewin, 2007), there was certainly a justification for presenting more content on the integration of Christian principles with psychology. However, the broadening of the approach meant that some non-Christian students were also interested in taking the course. It was also helpful for all students, regardless of their religious affiliation or non-afffiliation, to have an overview of some of the main tenets of other major religions so that they would be better prepared to counsel clients who came from different faith perspectives.

In the early years of the course, I did about half of the teaching and I invited a number of guest lecturers to provide the remaining lectures. The majority of these lecturers were Christian psychologists involved in private practice, school counselling, or academia. As I gained more experience in running the course, I eventually took over all of the lectures, covering the following topics: (a) Worldviews and their presuppositions; (b) truth, relativism, and postmodernism in psychology; (c) issues facing the religious counsellor in the workplace and issues facing the nonreligious counsellor when dealing with religious clients (e.g., ethical and moral issues, professional practice, use of particular techniques and strategies); (d) brief overview of major religious worldviews (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity) and their relevance to the counselling context; and (e) models for the integration of psychological theory and religious principles and practice, and an evaluation of these models using Christianity as an example. The main theories examined in this process were psychoanalytic theory, behaviourism and its variants, and person-centred theory. Assessment involved (a) a worldview essay in which students had to reflect on the way in which their own worldview may affect their work as psychologists, (b) an essay of their choice on a topic relevant to religious issues in counselling, and (c) a class presentation based on their essay topic. If I were to teach this class again, I would also try to incorporate a lecture on the ways in which religious beliefs can impact positively or negatively on a person's mental health and well-being, and I would incorporate more information on ethical issues when dealing with religious issues in therapy.

There were a number of advantages in running the course in this manner. First, piggy-backing on an existing generic course meant that I was able to get it up and running quickly. Second, it provided an avenue for covering material not usually taught as part of the psychology curriculum, but as I have argued, material that is important in the training of psychologists. Third, it allowed students to explore topics of interest to them, which in turn expanded both my own and the classmates' knowledge and appreciation of the complexity of different issues. Indeed, the student essays and presentations provided a wealth of interesting material, covering topics as diverse as forgiveness, grief counselling, rehabilitation of criminals, negative effects of cult involvement, sin as a stigmatising label, marriage counselling, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, Buddhist meditation, self-esteem, and stages of children's religious understanding.

However, there were also some disadvantages or challenges in running such a course. First, the fact that it was run under the banner of a generic course meant that it disappeared when the generic course was later cut. Second, materials were developed a bit "on the fly" in the early years in particular, though improvements were continually made and I believe it developed into a very strong course. Third, it was often challenging to present material from other religions in a fair and impartial manner, though I tried to do this through ensuring that all of that material was supported by suitable references. In hindsight, it may have been helpful to have some guest lecturers of other faiths. Fourth, I felt it was only fair to let students know that I personally held a Christian worldview. However, this also created expectations of my own behaviour. Indeed, I was very conscious that my actions would often speak louder than my words. Was I compassionate if a student had trouble completing an assignment and needed an extension? Was I fair in assessing students regardless of whether or not they

agreed with my viewpoint? It was sometimes challenging to remain impartial, yet I always tried to maintain an atmosphere where each person felt free to express his or her opinion without judgement from me or any other class member. For me, the tension was more internal, as I sometimes wrestled with wanting to say more, yet knowing it was not my job to prosletyse. Indeed, that is one of the things that anyone teaching such a course must guard against, which leads me to a discussion of safeguards.

Safeguards

The main safeguard in running such a course is to be aware of your own values and how they can affect your work as a lecturer and psychologist. By reflecting on your values and monitoring your own attitudes and behaviours, you will be less likely to impose your values on your students or clients (Hage, 2006; Passmore, 2003). As Jones (1994) has argued, "the most limiting and dangerous biases are those that are unexamined and hence exert their effect in an unreflective manner" (p. 197).

A second and related safeguard is to ensure you do not overstep the boundary between lecturer and spiritual leader (cf. Hage, 2006). Our aim should not be to provide students with "'expert training' on a specific faith tradition but on how to take various faith perspectives into consideration in their role as psychologists" (Russell & Yarhouse, 2006, p. 436). As academics, our primary task is to train future psychologists rather than pastors or religious leaders. Sometimes these areas overlap. For example, I have taught students who have expressed a desire to work in Christian-related areas when they complete their psychology training (e.g., as Christian youth workers, school chaplains, or counsellors within a church setting). In those particular cases, I have shared more specific information with the students about how to integrate their faith with their psychology studies. As Hage (2006) notes, however, it is important to remember the distinction between psychological therapy and pastoral counselling. If a Christian academic felt that spiritual direction was his or her main task, perhaps he or she would be better suited to some type of Christian ministry.

Third, Russell and Yarhouse (2006) have suggested that one "constraint to providing effective religious and spiritual training may be a fear of offending a client or of engaging in ethical violations" (p. 434). In both teaching and counselling, we are bound by the APS Code of Ethics. That Code provides guidelines about being sensitive to diversity issues, not requiring supervisees or trainees to disclose personal information, and not acting outside of one's areas of competence. We need to make sure that we abide by those guidelines and that we provide our students with proper instruction regarding their obligations to the Code. If we are diligent in doing this, we will hopefully eliminate ethical violations resulting from an improper use of religious or spiritual issues in teaching or therapy.

Finally, it is important for academics with an interest in the integration of psychology and Christian principles to take the same critical and scholarly approach in their teaching and research of religious issues as they would in any other area of psychology. This should go without saying. However, when people are committed to certain belief systems, it can be tempting to shortcut proper academic rigour for what one believes to be true. In this area, it is even more important to take a scholarly approach, as we will sometimes come under more scrutiny from our colleagues and others in the profession. More importantly, we owe it to our students.

Future Directions

Returning to the three models proposed by Yarhouse and Fisher (2002), I believe the Religious Distinctive Model would be especially useful for those wanting to work in church settings or in chaplaincy roles within school, hospitals, or prisons. There are currently a number of counselling programs in Australia that use such a model, though no similar APS-accredited psychology programs are currently offered. Students interested in gaining registration as a psychologist, but wishing to work in Christian settings, may find it useful to pursue both a psychology degree and a qualification from one of the religiously distinctive counselling programs. The time and expense in doing a combined degree may make this an unattractive alternative for some. For those students, the Certificate-Minor Model may be a better alternative. This would involve flexibility on the part of program coordinators to allow students to enrol in cross-institutional credits or provide them with exemptions for religious courses completed elsewhere. However, given that students in most psychology programs are encouraged to study some non-psychology electives anyway, this is certainly a viable alternative.

As noted earlier, one of the problems with the Certificate-Minor Model, is that it could give the impression that only some students need to be exposed to the topic of religion or spirituality (Yarhouse & Fisher, 2002). In view of the arguments provided earlier, I believe that such training needs to be available to all students. Thus, the Integration-Incorporation Model may be the most viable in the current Australian context. Multicultural courses would provide an obvious avenue for discussing religious diversity. As Hage (2006) has noted, information about religion and coping could also be addressed in personality courses,

the interaction of religious beliefs and psychopathology could be included in courses on abnormal behaviour, and methods for evaluating or assessing religious beliefs and functioning could be incorporated into practicum coursework. Social psychology courses also contain a number of topics that could intersect with religious issues (e.g., attitude development and attitude change, stereotyping and prejudice, and social influence). Lifespan development courses could include a discussion of religious issues under topics such as socialisation, identity development, and issues facing the aged such as bereavement and their own mortality. Health psychology courses could include a module examining the research linking religious beliefs with psychological and physical health, and counselling and ethics courses could include discussion of strategies for dealing with religious issues that arise in therapy.

Supervision also provides an ideal avenue for assisting students to deal effectively with religious and spiritual issues as they pertain to therapy with particular clients. Indeed, Aten and Hernandez (2004) have provided a template for supervisors to help students gain competency in dealing with such issues across eight domains (e.g., religious/spiritual interventions, assessment, and multicultural sensitivity).

Finally, more research is needed. In their study of directors of APA-accredited clinical training programs, Brawer et al. (2002) found that only about 30% of directors indicated there was a staff member in their faculty who had "published a scholarly work concerning the role of religion/spirituality as it relates to psychology" (p. 205). In a similar study of directors of APA-accredited predoctoral internship sites, 82% of directors indicated that they had no internship staff who had published such scholarly works (Russell & Yarhouse, 2006). I suspect that the rate would be lower in Australia. If effective materials are to be developed for the training of Australian psychology students in religious/spiritual issues relevant to their work as psychologists, it is essential that quality homegrown research is conducted. Through a three-pronged approach in teaching, supervision, and research, we can ensure that the next generation of Australian psychologists is trained to competently deal with religious or spiritual issues in the counselling domain.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank a former student, Michael Mennell, for first alerting me to the differences between the APA and APS Codes of Ethics regarding religious issues in counselling. I would also like to thank the other students who have completed my Religious Issues in Counselling course. They have taught me much about the challenges and joys of integration.

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