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*Exploring the Sacred Terrain  
Spirituality & Social Work*

# Research and Teaching

In this workshop, I will invite you to give answers to some questions. You can answer them anonymously. If you allow me to use your answers for my research and teaching, you can give the written answers to me after the session. Your responses will be entered electronically, and the handwritten responses will be destroyed afterwards.

This is completely voluntary, and will not affect your participation and learning in this workshop.

# 1. Why are we here?

## Your expectations regarding this workshop

## 2. The Meaning of Spirituality

What does the word spirituality mean for you?

# *Different Meanings of Spirituality*

- ▣ Waste-paper category for anything good or desirable
- ▣ Confused with the religious
- ▣ Product label
- ▣ Supernatural realm
- ▣ Overarching, binding order
- ▣ Location, position in the world
- ▣ Energy, life-force
- ▣ Identity: Who and what I am?
- ▣ Connection: with people, and with the world
- ▣ Meaning, purpose
- ▣ Supreme value/principle
- ▣ Existential concerns
- ▣ Ultimate Concern
- ▣ Transcendence

# *Spirituality & Religion*

## Religion

- ▣ Binding together
- ▣ Order
- ▣ Structure
- ▣ Dogma

## Spirituality

- ▣ *Breathe, wind*
- ▣ *Orientation*
- ▣ *Process*
- ▣ *Experience, value*

# Religious Affiliation and Religious Orientation

	Buddhism	Christianity	Islam	Taoism
Fundamentalism				
Liberal				
Transcendental				

# Fundamentalist Orientation

## Cosmology/Worldview:

- ▣ Believe in a supernatural order which is objectively “out there,” usually including a Creator or a powerful being overseeing the Created order

## Scripture:

- ▣ Believe in sacred texts as absolute truth, literal interpretation, mythical narratives taken as historical events



# Fundamentalist Orientation

## Ethics:

- ▣ Dogmatism, definite stand on moral issues, distinct right and wrong (e.g. abortion is a sin, extramarital sex is always wrong)

## Membership:

- ▣ Clear boundary between believers and non-believers, hostile/aggressive stance against “heretics” and/or believers of other faiths

# Liberal Orientation

## Cosmology/Worldview:

- ▣ Super-ordinate reality, may or may not believe in an objective supernatural order

## Scripture:

- ▣ Religious texts as authoritative statements or helpful references/guideline

# Liberal Orientation

## Ethics:

- ▣ Ethical principles instead of absolute divine prescriptions (e.g. a relational context of affection and respect is more important than marital status)

## Membership:

- ▣ Boundary between believers and non-believers still maintained, but not rigid or dogmatic

# Transcendental Orientation

## Cosmology/Worldview:

- ▣ Reality as constructed, emphasizes meaning and significance rather than facticity, focuses on transcendence
- ▣ Embraces diversity and differences

## Scripture:

- ▣ Accounts of spiritual experience, multiple pathways to transcendence and truth

# Transcendental Orientation

## Ethics:

- ▣ Decision based on comprehensive consideration of context, values, motivation, action, intended consequence, meaning, significance, etc.

## Membership:

- ▣ Not important, boundary not emphasized; usually embrace shared humanity

# Spiritual Reality



- ▣ Beyond the common-sense world
- ▣ Transpersonal
- ▣ Core sense of self – Depth, ground of being
- ▣ Inevitability
- ▣ Awe, bliss, overwhelmed
- ▣ Peak, fulfillment, completion
- ▣ Connection, union, tranquility

# 3. How is spirituality related to your work as a social worker?

# *Spirituality and Social Work*

- ▣ Reaction against the scientific-technological orientation
- ▣ Recognizes the random or disorderly aspects of lived reality
- ▣ Engaging with subjective experience and meaning making
- ▣ The centrality of values in social work practice: Compassion, care, justice, truth, betterment, etc.
- ▣ Discontent with conventional SW solutions
- ▣ Personal need/quest of the social worker
- ▣ A bandwagon to the spirituality market place



# Spiritual Quest in a Secular City

- ▣ Hong Kong from an insider-outsider perspective
- ▣ Secularization – drying up, de-spiritization
- ▣ The colonial legacy and political reality
- ▣ Survival and living – higher strivings
- ▣ Fetish and idol worship
- ▣ What is the real thing?
- ▣ Identity, personality, agency and ultimate well-being

# De-Spiritization

- ▣ Refuse to recognize and to engage with the spiritual
- ▣ Displace the spiritual with rigid (dogmatic/religious) articulations and practices
  - External locus of control, authority, and ethical responsibility
- ▣ Refuse to recognize and engage with diversity
  - Standardization, homogeneity, conformity
  - Fear of difference, exclusion, otherization, demonization

# De-Spiritization

- ▣ Avoidance of depth and the extraordinary
  - Cynicism and critical thinking
  - Superficiality, mediocrity, order/norm/cliché
- ▣ Pre-occupation with order: Fear of life and desire
  - Life as fluid, contingent, and uncertain
  - Fear of disorder, chaos
  - Obsessive-compulsive need for order and control
  - Fear and hostility
  - Blood-lust as perversion of desire
  - Law and punishment versus grace and compassion

# Beyond Binary Opposites

- ▣ Between order and chaos

Order, routine, stability,  
institution

creation

↓ entropy,  
destruction,

Chaos, contingency,  
disruption happening

- ▣ Living and dying as the same process



The Möbius Strip

# *Value and Spirituality*

- ▣ Personal enlightenment
- ▣ Ultimate well-being
- ▣ Compassion for human kind
- ▣ Justice and righteousness
- ▣ Positive transformation: Social and personal change, development, growth, improvement
- ▣ Humanity, actualization, realization: Image of God, Buddhahood

# Spiritual Quest and the Common-Sense World

## Common-Sense World

- ▣ The Natural Attitude: Take for granted, unquestioning
- ▣ Universalist imagination: Difference as deviant and dangerous
- ▣ Need for order and structure
- ▣ Denial, exclusion, suppression of threatening/subversive views
- ▣ Assimilation and accommodation

# The Spirituality Market Place

- ▣ Consuming the spiritual as a symptom of affluence and excess
- ▣ Globalization and coloniality
  - Euro-American hegemony
  - Missionaries and colonization
  - The imperial gaze and internalized orientation
- ▣ Imagining the spiritual as bucolic
  - The anti-urban bias and escapism
  - The challenge of the city: Complexity, heterogeneity, contradiction, information and experience overload, anomie, self-doubt
  - Exoticism and the colonial gaze

# The Spirituality Market Place

- ▣ Pseudo-spiritual needs:
  - Sense of order
  - Moral superiority
  - Displaced/perverted desire
  - Dissatisfaction, resentment, and stone-casting
- ▣ Spirituality as commodity and product
  - Consumption, instant gratification, superficiality
  - Packaging and delivery
  - Talk, action, and being
- ▣ Locating ourselves within the capitalist order – ambivalence and localized resistance



# Spiritual Quest

- ▣ An alternative way of constructing reality – insight, vision, enlightenment
- ▣ An alternative way of being - the courage to be (different)
- ▣ If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him! (遇佛弑佛)
  - Idol worship
  - Discipleship
  - Personal quest
- ▣ Prophets as deviants: Aloneness, vulnerability, helplessness
- ▣ Adventure (deviation) and return: Enlightenment and community

# Spirituality and Everyday Life

- ▣ Whereas spirituality often takes us beyond the common-sense world, it is mostly realized in our everyday life
- ▣ Spirituality may appear as deviance, trespass, and rupture, but can be experienced as fully “natural”
  - The Natural Attitude, socialization and habituation (to not see, feel, and act spiritually)
  - The spiritual as deviant-but-natural (反常合道)
  - The true nature

# Eros towards the World

- ▣ Desire and the ground of being - Putting the “being” back in well-being
- ▣ Desire as the driving force in human life
- ▣ Desire as appreciation, connection, and realization
- ▣ Desire as self-affirming, self actualizing, and self-transcending
- ▣ Desire and moral courage
- ▣ Desire involves the total person
- ▣ Desire as spiritual

# 4. What do you see as obstacles on your own journey towards spiritual growth?

# Engaging with Religious/Spiritual Experience of Clients

- ▣ Recognizing the religious dimension of the client's experience
- ▣ Self-knowledge and reflection
- ▣ Let the client raise the issue first
- ▣ Focus on personal experience instead of religious affiliation or membership
- ▣ Focus on personal meaning instead of doctrinal correctness or canonicity

# Engaging with Religious/Spiritual Experience of Clients

- ▣ Share structure of meaning as well as communicating specific content
- ▣ Expand instead of restricting the client's options
- ▣ Embrace diversity and difference
- ▣ Compassion – Embrace the client's weakness and darkness without judging or condemning
- ▣ Transcendence – Moving beyond the common sense order.

# Spirituality, Justice, and Social Change

- ▣ Justice as a neglected dimension
- ▣ Our idea of justice is conditioned by our social location and political position
- ▣ Imagining the “other” position requires self-transcendence (including one’s own need, perspective, and interest), compassion, and a different idea of identity and community
- ▣ Justice requires the recognition of the shared humanity with the other – the Ground of Being (Image of God, Buddhahood)

# Spirituality, Justice, and Social Change

- ▣ The practice of justice implies community building – a community of action that seeks to transform the community it interfaces with (e.g. the social work profession within a locality, an activist group interfacing with different locales)
- ▣ On means and ends
  - Spiritual orientation as pacifier, opium of the people
  - Adversarial process and the possibility of alternative strategies
  - Judgement and moral superiority
  - Change, subversion, resistance and revolution



# The Social Worker as a Spiritual Being

- ▣ Trespassing boundaries: personal/professional, arts/science, spiritual/carnal
- ▣ Practice (therapy and/or social change) as personal quest
- ▣ Spiritual meaning in social work
- ▣ Oppression, violation, wear and tear: Burnout and dry up (secularization)
- ▣ Self care, growth and transcendence
- ▣ Fellowship and community

5. What do you see as the next step you can take in your own journey towards spiritual growth?

# Thanks a lot for your participation!

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