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Spiritualizing: An Unhelpful Defense Mechanism

by Rev. David Songy, O.F.M.Cap., S.T.D., Psy.D.

One might politely assume that a faithful Christian finds support in the spiritual life for any healing process, whether it involves a physical, psychological, or spiritual problem. In fact, clinicians are ethically bound to respect a person's religious beliefs. However, spirituality can also be misunderstood and misused as a defense mechanism, thereby interfering with the healing process. An important goal of the integrated treatment program at Saint Luke Institute is to distinguish spiritual issues from psychological ones, so that both resources can be used effectively.

Psychology's view of religion and spirituality is distinct from the Christian faith perspective, and growing religious diversity in the United States has resulted in greater disagreement about the meaning of religiousness and spirituality. Social scientists refer to religion as a specific set of organized beliefs and practices shared by a community or group and to spirituality as an individual practice leading to a sense of peace and purpose, affecting the meaning of life and connection with others.

However, the Christian understanding of religion and

spirituality flows from revelation, i.e., God, who truly exists, articulates faith. Christ, the Word of God made flesh, is not simply an originator of a religious community nor a source of meaning, but the very presence of God.

Understanding Defense Mechanisms

Before addressing how spirituality can be misunderstood and misused, serving as a "spiritualizing" defense mechanism, it is important to explain the nature of a psychological defense mechanism. When a painful thought or feeling in the unconscious threatens to rear its ugly head, a defense mechanism channels the unconscious to express itself indirectly, in a disguised form. Some people will deny or repress a feeling, as if it did not exist. A person may project a feeling onto an authority figure or act in a passive aggressive manner. There are a variety of defensive options: intellectualization, dissociation, displacement, humor, sublimation, and suppression.

Defense mechanisms are necessary. Without them, people can become overwhelmed and decompensate. They vary in usefulness and are healthiest when flexible, i.e., providing sufficient protection to an individual ego while

remaining open to the healing process.

"Spiritualizing" closely resembles the defense mechanism of intellectualization, which uses reason to avoid an unconscious conflict and associated emotional stress. One concentrates on the intellectual components of the situation to create distance from anxiety-provoking emotions. Thus, it effectively removes oneself, emotionally, from a stressful event.

Intellectualization hides emotions behind big words and an almost scientific focus on the facts. For example, a wife whose husband is dying may try to learn everything about his disease, its prognosis, and treatment options. She may talk about it in scientific terms, analyzing and describing the medical facts about his condition. Doing so may help her not to feel all the pain, anger, and onslaught of other emotions provoked by the imminent death of her beloved.

Identifying Spiritual Bypass

"Spiritualizing" occurs when people of faith use their spirituality to avoid dealing with threatening personal issues. Contemporary scholarship

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“. . . a defense mechanism channels the unconscious to express itself indirectly, in a disguised form."

Case Studies

Departing from our norm, these three case studies provide the reader with insight into how "spiritualizing" can present in different forms.

Case Study | **Sister Sarah**

Sister Sarah suffers from scrupulosity, a religious form of obsessive compulsive disorder. She has difficulty holding down a job because she believes that if she does not do a "proper" hour of adoration after daily Mass, she cannot leave the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. When her counselor tries to broach the subject, she says that to leave earlier would be to cooperate with the devil.

Her high score on psychological avoidance on the *Spiritual Bypass Scale* suggests that she is avoiding an underlying emotional issue, which

An integrated treatment plan between spiritual director and clinician is often best when spirituality is misused as a defense mechanism.

keeps her in this obsessive thought and compulsive behavior pattern by referencing the Blessed Sacrament and the devil. Her high score on spiritualizing indicates that she is exaggerating the spiritual significance of prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

Trying to "resolve" the spiritual issues serves only to avoid addressing the psychological problem. It is helpful for the spiritual director and clinician to work together in developing treatment goals.

Case Study | **Father Henry**

Father Henry has been asked to undergo counseling because a woman in the parish accused him of being "too friendly." He denies the accusation, and while agreeing to counseling, does not want to explore the issue of celibacy with his clinician, with whom he would prefer to focus only on boundary skills. He would prefer to discuss celibacy only with his spiritual director, because the topic can arise in the context of prayer.

His moderate score on psychological avoidance suggests that he is

sidestepping an important emotional and relational issue by insisting that it is only spiritual in nature. A moderate score on spiritualizing indicates that he considers personal prayer as the sole arena for growing in the virtue of celibate chastity.

In this case, a discussion with both spiritual director and clinician can emphasize the necessity of integral work on the issue of celibate chastity. Father Henry needs to discover what human formation issues underlie his struggles and distinguish these from any spiritual formation issues to take full advantage of both spiritual and psychological resources.

Case Study | **Father John**

Father John has been suffering from depression for several years. His personal physician has recommended medication and therapy, but John will not hear of it, saying he needs to spend more time in prayer. He will often go on retreats and spends a great deal of time reading the Scriptures and praying, but his depression persists. He has tried

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Case Studies *continued*

working with spiritual directors but felt discouraged when they suggested he see a professional counselor.

His high score on psychological avoidance indicates that he is avoiding the exploration of possible psychological or psychiatric factors by insisting that his struggles are spiritual in nature.

A moderate score on spiritualizing suggests that he wants to focus on personal prayer as the solution to feelings of depression.

As in the case of Father Henry, developing an integrated treatment plan with both his spiritual director and clinician will help Father John to

take full advantage of both spiritual and psychological resources.

For confidentiality, reasons, names, identifying data, and other details of treatment have been altered.

Safety in Spirituality *continued*

refers to this as spiritual bypass: a defensive psychological posture cultivated by a tendency to privilege or exaggerate spiritual beliefs, emotions, or experiences over and against psychological needs to avoid or bypass difficult emotions or experiences.

John Welwood first introduced this term in 1984 to address the tendency of using spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks. Spiritual bypass helps one avoid working on mental health issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, narcissism, and addiction, and ultimately results in a stagnated level of personal development that is less sophisticated than what spiritual practice is intended to create. Ultimately, spiritual bypass corrupts the true nature of spiritual practice, and spirituality becomes just another way of rejecting one's experience.

Spiritual bypass can be separated into two areas: psychological avoidance and spiritualizing. Psychological

avoidance is the process of sidestepping or avoiding difficult emotions, experiences, or circumstances by focusing on spiritual beliefs or assumptions. Spiritualizing is the exaggeration of the spiritual significance of an event or issue.

Thomas Aquinas offers a succinct principle that explains why spiritual bypass is problematic: "Grace does not destroy nature but fulfills its potential." Simply stated, when a person assumes a defensive psychological posture, it is more difficult for the grace of God to function. This implies no limitation on the part of God, but a lack of cooperation on the part of the person.

Researchers have developed a useful instrument, the *Spiritual Bypass Scale - 13*, which rates the level of spiritual bypass utilized by a client. Such information could be presented to clients to help them move from resistance to change, appropriately engaging the psychological change process and focusing on the spiritual life in a manner consistent with mature faith. Clients might begin to explore how their spiritual life has

helped them compartmentalize, disown, and avoid their unfinished psychological work.

Once psychological issues are addressed appropriately, the client is free to work on both spiritual and psychological fronts and engage in an integrated process of healing.

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Fr. David Songy, O.F.M.Cap., S.T.D., Psy.D. is the president and CEO of Saint Luke Institute.

Looking Ahead

New Leadership Anticipated this Summer



Saint Luke Institute has undergone significant change in the last year. As a result, we are strong and well-positioned to continue our healing ministry for clergy and men and women religious. Fr. David Songy, O.F.M.Cap., SLI's president and CEO, will be departing this July and returning to his province in Denver. Even as we anticipate his leave-taking, we are grateful for the solid financial foundation

and professional reputation SLI has enjoyed under his careful stewardship. We will continue to build on these notable assets as we strengthen our service to the Church. Should you have questions about SLI, our services, or this change, please contact Fr. David directly at 202-744-9140.

2022 Annual Benefit

Honoree and Chairpersons

With delight we can share that Fr. David Songy will be honored with the Saint Luke Award for his steadfast service to clergy and religious men and women in need of mental health services and his eight years of service to SLI. The 2022 Annual Benefit will be held—in-person and in his honor—at the Nunciature, Monday, October 17, 2022. The Saint Luke Institute Board of Directors will serve as the Annual Benefit Chairpersons. Visit Sli.org/Benefit for more information.

Honoring Our Legacy

25TH ANNUAL BENEFIT TO SUPPORT
SAINT LUKE INSTITUTE

MONDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2022

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Apostolic Nunciature
3339 Massachusetts Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20008

Your support is vital for the compassionate care
we provide men and women serving the Church.

Upcoming Webinar: Reclaiming Connection

Presented by

Rev. Hugh Lagan, SMA, Psy.D.

Thursday, May 26 | 1:00-2:00 pm ET
\$25.00

Human beings are hard-wired to connect. Long before social distancing became part of our reality, however, a silent epidemic of loneliness was sweeping the world. Rev. Hugh Lagan, SMA, Psy.D., explores the impact of isolation on health and well-being and offers skills for reclaiming the power of interpersonal connection in daily life.

Fr. Lagan is a priest with the Society of African Missions and a licensed clinical psychologist. He leads workshops and retreats internationally on psychological and spiritual well-being, mental health and resilience.

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Special SLIconnect Offer

It is more critical than ever to talk about mental health and offer support to those in need. Enter the code MHA2022 at checkout to enjoy \$15 off your next SLIconnect purchase. Offer expires May 31, 2022.

Mental Health Awareness Month

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Practical resources for healthy life and ministry. Learn more at www.SLIconnect.org/browse



SAINT LUKE INSTITUTE
8380 COLESVILLE ROAD, SUITE 300
SILVER SPRING MD 20910-6264 | 301-445-7970

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