

A MATTER OF FAITH

*How world views that include religion
can fit into counselling*

BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI



At its simplest, a world view can be defined as just that: an overall conception of how one sees and interprets the world.

But what makes up an individual's world view is complex, unique, and ever changing.

"I think it can be said with confidence that every single person is continually forming a world view, whether through determined effort, unconscious effect of our circumstances, culture, gender, status, the influence of others, and more," says Joel Durkovic, founder and director of Arbour Counselling Centre in Victoria. "We are all continually impacted by the systems into which we are born, within which we live, to which we contribute, and from which we receive."

Faith, or the lack of it, can be a significant part of one's world view.

"Some conclude, in faith, mind you, that no God exists. Many are most comfortable saying they just don't and can't know, and for all practical purposes, they opt out of deliberate or intentional grappling with faith," says Durkovic. "Still others do not identify with any faith tradition, per se, yet intrinsically sense their spiritual nature. For others yet, their faith tradition and practice point to the very foundation and essence of what it means to have purpose and meaning as a human being."

Especially for people in the latter category, professional guidance and faith are intrinsically bound.

Ershad Fawcett, founder and CEO of Genesis Family Empowerment Society in Vancouver, reminds us that the primary goal of counselling is to alleviate the client's emotional and psychological pain and suffering. For the faithful, religion is key to meeting that goal.

"The counsellor can achieve counselling goals by first drawing from

religious teaching when using faith-based counselling," says Fawcett, who supports that approach with a citation from *Spirituality and Psychiatry*: "Religion can be a vital aspect of the client's social and psychological identity that notably shapes his (or her) values, beliefs, and behaviours. Moreover, religion satisfies the instinctive human need for the meaning of experiences (i.e. the experience of health or illness) and the general purpose of life."*

For many, mental health is only truly possible through faith. According to a Project Canada Survey, called Religion and Spirituality in Canada, no less than two in three people across the country [Canada] say that their religious or spiritual beliefs are important to the way they live their lives.

Therein lies the issue: integrating religious values and beliefs into counselling. While having respect for and even an in-depth understanding of a religion is something counsellors can learn, many clients want more than that.

LEAVING VALUES AT THE DOOR

Counsellors are often trained with the simplistic phrase "leave your values at the door."

"It's a way to convey that we need to be aware of and distinguish between our own agendas and the needs of the client so as not to mindlessly project assumptions, unresolved baggage, or world views upon the client," says Durkovic.

"But if we, as therapists, are not conscious of the way we make sense of the world and people, we are apt to do more damage than good," he adds. "Rather than attempt to leave our values at the door, we do best to know from whence our values come so that we don't trip ourselves or others up in the tangle."

Of the myriad factors influencing



Religion can be a vital aspect of the client's social and psychological identity that notably shapes his (or her) values, beliefs, and behaviours. Additionally, religion satisfies the need for the meaning of experiences and the general purpose of life.

* Cook, C., Powell, A., and Sims, A. (2009). *Spirituality and Psychiatry*. London: Royal College of Psychiatry.

** Retrieved on August 24, 2016 from http://www.reginaldbibby.com/images/PCS_Release_Religion_Spirituality_Remain_Pervasive_in_Canada_Easter_2012.pdf

individual world views, some can be learned or understood. For example, culture, education, upbringing, and some experiences can be studied, discussed, imagined, and even experienced in order to better understand people.

It also makes sense that a deeper, or at least more immediate, understanding is possible when a counsellor and client share factors contributing to a world view. For example, counsellors of certain Asian backgrounds may have a natural understanding of a collectivist world view. A counsellor who has personal experience with trauma, abuse, or grief may naturally have a more immediate connection when clients discuss these issues.

So, too, with religion.

“Religion is an important element of counselling because people — the client and the counsellor — are moved by what they believe, and using a client’s religious understanding will strengthen the relationship with the client for many reasons,” says Fawcett.

Durkovic concurs.

“If you’ve grown up with a theology that has informed and continues to inform how you approach daily life, there’s value in being able to talk to somebody who has an understanding of what that means and is familiar with the whole culture surrounding that experience,” he says.

That common ground also adds an element of safety. Durkovic says people want to feel confident they won’t be guided in a direction that subverts the values they’ve grown up with.

None of this is intended to suggest counsellors can only understand issues and values they have personally experienced — after all, counsellors are educated to listen carefully and recognize nuances that affect anyone’s perspective. Rather, the suggestion

is that counsellors naturally draw on their own experiences to inform their practice when it is appropriate to do so. The connection they form with clients might be a touch speedier because there is a shared fundamental understanding. Some counsellors may even choose areas of specialty because of personal experience.

Nevertheless, some people get squirmy when counsellors admit and perhaps promote a faith-based world view. Would we feel the same if counsellors promoted a cultural background, as in “Syrian born and raised” or “second-generation Chinese-Canadian” or “Punjabi speaker”? Or if counsellors listed their experiences on the “about us” pages of their websites, as in “cancer survivor” or “mother of three teenagers” or “vegetarian and an animal lover”? Is it not simply a way of reaching out to prospective clients by saying, “I understand what you are going through” or “I share a world view that may be similar to yours in ways that matter to you”? After all, it is easier to connect with someone when there is a foundation of shared understanding.



No less than 2 in 3 people across [Canada] say that their religious or spiritual beliefs are important to the way they live their lives.

— PROJECT CANADA SURVEYS, RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN CANADA, RETRIEVED ON AUGUST 24, 2016 FROM [HTTP://WWW.REGINALDBIBBY.COM/IMAGES/PCS_RELEASE_RELIGION_SPIRITUALITY_REMAIN_PERVASIVE_IN_CANADA_EASTER_2012.PDF](http://www.reginaldbibby.com/images/PCS_RELEASE_RELIGION_SPIRITUALITY_REMAIN_PERVASIVE_IN_CANADA_EASTER_2012.PDF)

Conversely, while this encourages some, it may discourage others. Whether that matters depends largely on the counsellor, the practice they have, and the clients they want to assist.

CLIENT PROJECTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

At Jones Callahan Counselling and Consulting, Brian Callahan leads online workshops on executive and life coaching. Most of his clients seek him out because they are looking for a Buddhist or mindfulness-based coach.

“Counselling — psychology plus coaching — and the Buddhist teachings share many similarities,” says Callahan, who describes himself as a counsellor who approaches counselling from a Buddhist perspective. “They both engage life’s problems and challenges from the point of view that positive engagement can lead to change.”

Callahan points to positive psychology as being especially similar in that it aims to identify, strengthen, and practise a “healthy, sane state of being.”

“My teachers have called this ‘Basic Goodness’ and the qualities of this experience include being open-minded, open-hearted, clear, warm, present, and experiencing each moment as fresh,” says Callahan.

But what Callahan brings into sessions depends on the client and what they are seeking help with.

“It’s completely optional and up to the client whether I bring Buddhist teachings into session,” says Callahan. “If the client wants secular counselling, that’s what I offer.”

Durkovic calls himself a “counsellor who is Christian” versus a “Christian counsellor,” and he intentionally leaves mention of faith off his website. He trusts that community leaders who refer to him know about his faith through the



“I think being a Buddhist changes my counselling practice by supercharging my sense of empathy and offering a clear sense of a desired state of well-being.”

relationship he has developed with them and their constituents over the past eight or nine years.

“There’s so much projection that happens around the name ‘Christian,’ or any faith tradition. People assign their own meaning to it and may have strong feelings about it. I prefer to be able to say this is a neutral space, and what we want to offer is a safe space for anyone,” says Durkovic.

He feels discussions of faith are best explored as rapport and trust are built between the client and therapist.

“I remember talking to a woman on the phone for over an hour just for her to grill me about whether I was the right type of Christian to meet with her daughter,” says Durkovic. “Similarly, I’ve had a man see a Bible on my shelf, and he immediately projected that I was going to stuff it down his throat.”

Part of the problem is definition.

“Vast misunderstandings and disagreements exist over what it means to be Christian, both within the fold and without,” says Durkovic. “To be a Christian is not merely to espouse a set of beliefs or follow a rule of behaviours. Given a 2,000-year history chock full of both beautiful and heinous acts in the

name of Christ, it is no wonder so much confusion exists about what it means to be Christian.”

Unsurprisingly, the debate about what constitutes Christian counselling is also complex.

“Some contend that a Christian therapist should unapologetically facilitate and direct sessions with overt faith-based practices — such as suggesting and offering prayer or using scriptural passages to give guidance — as a standard of care,” says Durkovic. “Other Christian-faith therapists maintain this kind of practice is laden with assumptions that are not in the client’s best interest, even if the client has sought out a therapist of faith.”

Dr. Sam Reimer of Restoration Counselling Services in Kelowna calls himself a “Christian counsellor” and promotes both his Ph.D. in Christian Counselling and his RCC designation on his website.

“I cannot and will not deny either; I am proud, in a good way, of both designations,” says Reimer.

Reimer also uses scriptural passages and prayer in his sessions. He describes it as “catering to a culture.”

“Being Christian is all about a living,

dynamic relationship with God. The practical spirituality that flows from this relationship is how it impacts every aspect of the Christian’s life,” says Reimer. “We may consider that Christians are a cultural or societal entity and live within various cultures throughout the world.”

Reimer emphasizes that his views are his own and may not be adhered to by everyone who identifies as a Christian counsellor. He also recognizes not every client will want his services.

“I am aware there are probably some potential clients who will not contact me because of their misconceptions of me being a religious fanatic or a Bible-thumper,” he says.

He recalls only about a dozen clients over the past 20 years who didn’t return after the first session because, he believes, they were scared off by his consent forms. This doesn’t worry Reimer.

“According to statistics one can find online, there are almost two and a half billion adherents to Christianity,” says Reimer. “So even if only one per cent of them are Christian, there is still a huge market that may choose me over a non-Christian counsellor.”



“When I am working with a Muslim client who is unable to forgive themselves, I remind them that Allah is merciful and forgiving, and I affirm it using verses from the Qur'an.”

While variations also exist within Islamic traditions, Fawcett aims for neutrality and flexibility in order to serve a broader client base.

“It is possible someone out there does not want to use my services because I am a liberal Muslim,” says Fawcett, explaining that because she doesn't wear a hijab, her personal appearance does not fit the typical understanding of a Muslim woman.

“On the other hand, my flexibility can imply that my service is free of biases, and I can work with anyone from the same faith or anyone from a different faith,” she says. “I always state during my first session that I am not a judge making a judgment on their behaviour, and I make it clear that I am not willing to take the responsibility or the position of a preacher teaching them religion.”

Fawcett does draw from the Qur'an and uses teachings of the Prophet in ways that make sense to the client.

“When I am working with a Muslim client who is unable to forgive themselves, for example, I remind them that Allah is merciful and forgiving, and I affirm it using verses from the Qur'an,” she says. “But it is up to the client to make the final decision.”

STAYING CLIENT-CENTRED

An agenda set by the client is at the core of what counselling is about and distinguishes it from advice-giving.

“Client-centred means we recognize the power of change or growth falls within the clients themselves,” says Durkovic. “The counselling hour is for the client, focused on the client, and intended for the best interest and safety of the client.”

Durkovic believes most counsellors who happen to be Christian can be present to and process with clients who are uncomfortable with overt faith elements inside of the therapy dialogue.

“For these clients, the therapist of faith adjusts his or her language to make it palatable to the lens of the client's world view,” he says.

Fawcett takes a similar approach. While she will pray with a client if asked, she follows the client's lead.

“I shy away from religion or a spirituality perspective on the presenting problem if the client indicates through verbal or nonverbal cues that they don't want to discuss the matter based on their faith,” says Fawcett. “I believe I would be an incompetent counsellor if I allowed

my values to influence my counselling practice. For example, I always ask myself if I have the right to prevent a client from seeking a divorce in order to become independent, when I don't believe in divorce.”

That aside, Fawcett says most Islamic teaching fits into her practice.

“One of my counselling missions is to ‘strengthen the families,’ a concept profoundly influenced by Islamic teaching with emphasis on amending the family relationship,” she says. “My ultimate goal in counselling is to assist my client to overcome their difficulties regardless of religion, spirituality, or belief types unless the belief is profoundly self-destructive.”

Fawcett emphasizes that her counselling service is available to anyone of any faith or spirituality.

“I feel very comfortable with the way I do counselling,” she says, explaining that an important reason for her comfort is that she ensures her own world view does not influence the way she practices.

Reimer, too, welcomes all clients, regardless of faith, and asks in the consent forms if clients are open to spiritual guidance.

“I let the client know if they say ‘no,’ then we will be addressing their identified issues from a purely clinical perspective; and if they say ‘yes’ or ‘maybe’ or ‘a little bit,’ they are giving me permission to talk about God, faith, prayer, and the Scriptures, and that I would be doing that in a matter-of-fact way without preaching at them or pushing them in any particular denominational or theological direction,” says Reimer.

If clients are not open to spiritual guidance, he is “totally okay with it.”

“I commit to every client to be respectful and professional in all aspects and to be as impartial and objective as possible in helping them achieve their counselling goals as quickly as possible,” says Reimer.

Callahan has a background in Christian-based counselling. “I was a Catholic priest before I became a Buddhist, so almost my entire counselling practice as a priest was ‘pastoral counselling,’” says Callahan. It was a role that included spiritual direction and life coaching, as well as counselling in grief, marriage, and personal issues. “I would say that, when I was a priest, I offered humanistic counselling informed by my beliefs.”

He continues to say that the attitudes of kindness that he learned as a priest had “strong echoes” when he embraced Buddhism.

“I think being a Buddhist changes my counselling practice by supercharging my sense of empathy and offering a clear sense of a desired state of well-being. We all suffer,” he says. “When clients bring their issues or problems, I resonate with their suffering as the expression of what it is to be alive and sensitive. This resonance helps me listen from the heart with an open mind, open to finding creative

ways to reconnect with, strengthen, and practise well-being.”

Durkovic, who says his care, love, and respect of human beings come from faith-informed values, notes that counselling is a resource.

“As with any resource, be it conceptual, spiritual, or physical, the provider of the resource must be ethical in offering it, and this means to invite rather than impose,” says Durkovic. “I believe it is with this spirit that all therapists of faith can practise ethically.”

Fawcett talks about the necessity of competency.

“Counselling is a very serious practice because we work with human emotions, which are delicate and need to be handled with caution and sympathy,” says Fawcett. “It is a huge responsibility to take on.”



“Given a 2,000-year history chock full of both beautiful and heinous acts in the name of Christ, it is no wonder so much confusion exists about what it means to be Christian.”

Fawcett suggests frequent self-assessments, including asking oneself why one wants to be a counsellor.

“Make sincere attempts to understand your client’s world view and think objectively about the client’s values,” she adds. “And remember, this is the client’s counselling and not the counsellor’s.”

KNOW THYSELF

Durkovic points out that therapists who hold a faith tradition are not the only ones who must contend with the dilemmas of how to practise ethically with regard to imposing their world views. Everyone has a world view, whether steeped in a faith tradition or not, and everyone is responsible for the continual work of its formation and the consciousness of its presence.

“World views are what constitute the ‘person of the therapist,’” says Durkovic. “And since the person of the therapist is one object that is always present in a session with a client, it behooves us to give attention to who we are and to what we offer as persons.”

Durkovic believes the most helpful counsellors are those who know themselves well and are comfortable in their own skin.

“Therapists are often valued for their insight and clinical acumen, for their objectivity and fund of knowledge on a given matter, and yes, often for their spiritual world view,” says Durkovic. “But the essential work of therapy is to nurture and enable a client to explore, discover, or rediscover his or her own self and voice.”

And if the nurturing and support clients need are more valuable and helpful to them when accompanied by shared understanding of faith, then amen to that. ■