Editorial

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It has long been noted within the pages of this journal that the phenomena of human religiosity/spirituality have played and continue to play an enormously important and complex role in our species' quest for self-understanding, happiness and self-transcendence. The founders of the *Journal of Religion and Health* argued that to study the complexity of the phenomenology of religion and spirituality and its impact upon the human spirit for good or ill required an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary approach to the religious/spiritual dimension of life. I think it is fair to say that the *Journal*, in its nearly 50-year career as a scholarly enterprise and an existential venture, has never strayed from that imperative to search broadly and deeply through the human sciences and the humanities for the most comprehensive vision possible of the human spirit in search of the divine or the sacred.

As we might expect, such a lively intellectual dialog across the boundaries of the mind's ways of knowing not only will create a sense of the underlying unity of the experience of the divine or the sacred, but may also help us to face the challenge of living and working amidst the conflict or the contrast of multiple perspectives that are not easily reconcilable.

We see the intellectual excitement that seems to derive from this contrast in the contributions in this issue of the *Journal*.

Morgan Green and Marta Elliott, for example, present research that strongly suggests that religious affiliation, in itself, has no significant impact on health or happiness. However, the extent to which persons are self-identified as religious and thus believe in the meaning underlying their religious behavior that the sense of existential engagement with religion as a way of life does contribute substantially to health and/or happiness. Ironically, Green and Elliott found that those whose belief patterns were identified as fundamentalist were happier and less healthy than their counterparts whose belief pattern was more liberal, the latter being healthier and less happy. We see here the psychological significance of religious belief and practice in relationship to the question of human health and happiness. Yet, the question remains: are we searching for an understanding of religion or ways of being religious or spiritual that enhance the whole person in relationship to both health and

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happiness? If we imagine that there are or may be ways of being religious or spiritual, including ways of believing, which contribute significantly to both health and happiness, are we moving in our research and in our own spiritual quest beyond the orthodox/fundamentalist/postmodern dialectic that characterizes the religious/spiritual situation of our time?

Clearly, such a question requires us to wrestle with the deeper problem of the nature of religion/spirituality and how to define and measure religion and spirituality. Daniel Hall, Harold Koenig and Keith Meador seem to be wrestling with this and related questions in their contribution. They argue that many of the measures recently developed in the social sciences to study religion are designed to measure “religion in general” and are more concerned to determine who is religious and who is not. The most important consideration seems to be that religious persons *have* beliefs that differentiate them from non-religious persons but less consideration is given to the content of those beliefs. Hall and his colleagues want to challenge the “religion in general” approach of recent research and propose, instead, that religion is not just about having certain beliefs, but is rather a complex cultural-linguistic achievement by which persons’ subjectivity is formed. It is only in relationship to this cultural-linguistic totality that one’s beliefs and the psychological fact that one has them become coherent. What follows from this concept of religion as a cultural-linguistic phenomenon is a methodology that measures religion in terms of context-specific cultural-linguistic embodiments as faith traditions. By using a content analysis technique, they explore how persons answer significant questions about religious identity and behavior, after which experts in the religious traditions can determine the specific faith traditions from which the respondents are speaking in answering the researcher’s questions. If rigorously pursued, this context-specific approach to studying religion (and presumably its relationship to health) would begin to provide us with what Wittgenstein understood as the “language game”, that is, rule-governed linguistic behavior with a nonetheless unique vocabulary into which the speaker who wishes to play that game must be initiated or formed. It will be useful in understanding the phenomenon of religion, the authors have argued, to begin to learn more about the language games of Jews, Christians and Moslems, and their cultural-linguistic counterparts in the great traditions of the East. In the ongoing dialog about how to define and measure religion/spirituality, Hall and his colleagues have made a significant contribution. May the dialog continue!

Jennifer N. Belding and colleagues share research that shows that prayer as a way of reducing stress in confronting a potentially threatening social situation has no greater or lesser efficacy in that regard than a moment of encouraging self-talk before confronting a socially stressful situation. Their research shows that prayer cannot be sustained as a privileged form of self-soothing; however, for those who have been formed by faith traditions to experience prayer as a mode of trusting communion with the divine, and not merely a form of self-motivational encouragement, it may have greater efficacy than it would for those not so formed as Belding and her colleagues suggest. Perhaps, we can see here some of the significant implications of Hall’s and his colleagues’ proposal for a context-specific methodology in the study of religion and its potentially salutary effects upon health and wellbeing. Again, we are brought back to the complexity of the question we have been noting of the measures and methods used to study human religiosity and spirituality.

In the midst of these complex research questions, Susan Dyess and colleagues report on an emerging development in the religion–health field: the rise and development of Faith Community Nursing (FCN). Dyess and her colleagues assess the state of research on this now maturing field that links religion and health through the engagement of professional

nurses with members of faith communities. This is the first published review of the research literature in the field of FCN dating back to 1993. What the research literature seems to show is that professional nurses who work closely with communities of faith are making an important and valuable contribution to the health needs of members of faith communities as both health educators and providers. It is striking to consider that many of the professional nurses who work in FCN do so voluntarily or for modest stipends. While Dyess and her colleagues point out that future research on FCN needs to focus more on client/patient outcomes, they are clearly appreciative of this growing field of health care within faith communities.

Gracie E. H. Boswell and Kirstin C. Boswell-Ford utilize structural equation modeling(SEM) to carry out research with a cohort of chronically ill older adults guided by Atchley's Continuity of the Spiritual Self model. They raise interesting questions about what they call the "conceptual conundrum" of adequately defining and measuring religiosity and spirituality, given that there exists significant conceptual diversity about these constructs in the field of religion–health research. In proposing religiosity as a multidimensional construct with private and public domains and experiential spirituality as equally multidimensional. The authors offer an impressive example of social scientific research on religion and health that transcends the exclusively positivistic paradigm of much previous scientific research on religion. This study also examines the problem of the far too limited constructs in much religion–health research that confine the meaning of religion in human life to measurable behaviors like religious attendance at services in church, synagogue, mosque or temple. This is the kind of creative thinking that is deepening the conceptual and empirical understanding of religion/spirituality and their relationship to health.

Stathis Avramidis explores interesting questions in relationship to the human experience of drowning. In the wake of the death and destruction of the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and hurricane Katrina in 2005, where thousands of people lost their lives by drowning, Avramidis' s focus on drowning in the Bible and the contemporary world takes on greater urgency than it might have had for readers of the *Journal*. As Avramidis points out, in the biblical narratives about drowning, with the obvious exception of the mythologem of Noah's flood (interestingly renarrated in the recent film 2012), most drowning episodes end with the potential drowning victim surviving the threat of drowning. He further points out in the biblical narratives, victims are saved from drowning by acts of God, acts in which humans are commanded to intervene by God and by miracles. However, in contemporary narratives of drowning, there are no references to God's direct intervention to save the drowning or other miracles rescuing human beings from drowning. Neither are there, in the biblical narratives, accounts of near death experiences(NDE) nor the traumatization that afflicts the survivors of drownings. Religious care givers in the contemporary world, who may be working with survivors of drowning, may not be able to give meaning to the experience of drowning from the biblical narratives, but they can draw upon the significant work in psychological research on the meaning of trauma and how it may be healed by taking seriously those survivors who underwent near death experiences. Although Avramidis does not discuss this issue explicitly, it might be very interesting to interpret the biblical narratives of drowning psychologically. Perhaps in relationship to a psychological hermeneutic, the biblical narratives might achieve a whole new meaning for religious care givers and their surviving clients.

Lindsay B. Carey and Jeffrey Cohen present their study from Australia on health care chaplains' perceptions of whether they should participate in hospital research ethics committees (also known as institutional ethics committees). This research project, as Carey

and Cohen point out, is the result of a sustained discussion since the 1980s of the roles and responsibilities of non-clinical health care chaplains who work in clinical settings. The question was driven by the recommendation of the “Medical Research Advisory Committee” (MRAC) of the Australian “National Health and Research Medical Council” (NHMRC). They submitted that it would be important and helpful to have ministers of religion participate in ethics committees that would consider any research dealing with human subjects. While there was some academic criticism of this mandate from the NHMRC, Carey’s and Cohen’s research was to explore what health care chaplains felt about this mandate. The interesting result of their national survey was that nearly 90% of the 300 health care chaplains who responded were in favor of participating in hospital research ethics committees, yet less than 22% had ever done so. What follows in their discussion of the multiple questions about the appropriateness of health care chaplains participating on ethics committees will be of significant interest to health care chaplains everywhere as well as those who are interested in how a religious/spiritual dimension can be brought to bear within the world of institutional medical care and research.

Editorial Board member David Moss and his colleague Nancy Van Dyke Platt return to a subject they first wrote about in the *Journal* in 1973. However, they state clearly that the situation about which they are writing in this contribution has changed significantly. In 1973, they wrote about the priest’s wife, since there were no women in the priesthood of the Episcopal Church in 1973. Now things have changed. Women have been steadily entering the priesthood in the Episcopal Church since the first women priests were ordained in 1974, just a year after Moss and Van Dyke Platt wrote their first article. They argue that studying the husbands of women priests is as unprecedented in Christian history as it was for women to enter the priesthood. They write: “Husbands of priests present novel issues because there has never been anyone like them before”. Not only are we seeking to rethink what we mean by religion and spirituality as one important aspect of the work of the *Journal*, but we are also trying to map the profound ways in which our experience of the religious quest, both individually and collectively, is changing our basic assumptions about ourselves and the world and with them our fundamental human practices. We are pleased to publish this groundbreaking work on husbands of Episcopal priests in the *Journal of Religion and Health*.

Kevin J. Flannelly (who is also an Editorial Board member) and his colleagues bring us back to the question of the nature of religion and how to understand its salutary effects upon the human spirit, which we see running through other contributions in this issue of the *Journal*. This is the first of two articles from Flannelly and his colleagues to explore that question. In the article before us, Flannelly and colleagues turn to evolutionary psychiatry, and its construct of Evolutionary Threat Assessment Systems Theory (ETAS) to explore the significance of religion as a belief system and the impact of religious belief upon the process of generating or mitigating psychiatric symptoms. The authors argue on the basis of the research data they report that beliefs that generate the sense within the believer that the world is a dangerous place or a relatively safe place will play a large role in the generation of or protection from psychiatric symptoms. This fascinating article by Flannelly and colleagues is a remarkable example of inter and multidisciplinary thought and deserves to be widely read and discussed. The second article, further exploring the themes above, “Religion, Evolution and Mental Health: Attachment Theory and ETAS Theory” will appear in the September, 2010 issue of the *Journal of Religion and Health*.

In David Bittner’s contribution, we move from the quantitative and theoretical to personal narrative—a story of the quest for meaning and healing. Writing in both a courageous and an engaging style, he says: “In this paper, an aging baby boomer “tells all”

about his personal experience with some of the “pitfalls of organized religion,” as observed from his somewhat unusual perspective as a Jew by birth and a Roman Catholic by choice, and a lifelong Asperger’s sufferer, the butt of practical jokes in a variety of juvenile and adult settings”. We are grateful to David Bittner for sharing his story with us and hope that among other things, it will inspire others to share their stories of healing and meaning as well.

I am completing this Editorial on Easter Sunday, 2010. I am happy to announce that this morning the tree swallows arrived in Dorset Hollow and seem to be considering whether they will take up residence in the birdhouse on my lawn for the early summer hatching and feeding of their young. To honor these remarkable birds and their long flight from Mexico and Latin America and the mystery of life renewing itself they represent, I close with a poem I wrote after waiting too long one year for them to return.

Waiting for the Tree Swallows

The first time I saw them
My soul was still in winter,
 though the snow was nearly gone.
They suddenly appeared
 in the sky above me—
Tiny messengers from Beyond.
Putting all human aviators to shame,
They danced on air
 to the music of mating—
Two males performing aerobatics.
They took my breath away.

I did not know then,
 that they had chosen
 the birdhouse on my lawn
 as their summer home.
Each year they returned,
 bringing with them the miracle of grace,
 the sheer joy of life in harmony
With Nature’s Purpose.

Soaring, hunting, building nests,
 they brought their young into the world.

I found I came to count on them
 to remind me
 of the mystery of Otherness
 of the benevolence
 that is there
 at the core of things;
A blessing that appears
Without warning
And just as suddenly
disappears,

Leaving its trace upon our hearts
No matter how wrenching the disordered world can be.

But this year they were late.
With each day's delay of their arrival,
a strange dread shadowed me.

When my wife announced
that they had already settled
in the neighbor's boxes down the road,
I was stunned by the injustice of this random fate.

I heard a voice within me say
(Son of Appalachia that I am)
"I'll go down there and burn those damn boxes to the ground",
As if these little spirits of the air
had subjected me
to invidiousness, rejection and unrequited love.

Grace had become
Damnation.
I was thrown into the dark faith
of my wounded heart:
Nothing endures,
Nothing is trustworthy,
Nothingness lives
in every breathing creature—
The Omnipotent god of the turning earth.

And then,
They appeared—
Twirling in the air,
Fighting for the perfect space,
Diving to the pond
Taking the measure of the place to which Nature had guided them,
And I marveled—
At my woundedness,
At the call to trust again
in the paradox
of these winged travelers,
Who come and go
on no other schedule
but their own;
Who can be received only
in a prodigious act
of letting go.