



Spirituality, Religion, and Child Trauma Recovery

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Defining Spirituality and Religion

- Spiritually traditionally references the internal, individual relationship with one's Higher Power(s) or the reality of the cosmic, creative, divine, and/or sacred presence
- Religion traditionally references the community level engagement with structured beliefs and rituals
- The two are not mutually exclusive. Most religions teach the necessity of an internal, personal relationship in addition to participation in the faith community.



Spiritually Competent Care

- Born out of the Cultural Competence movement
- Defined as “health care sensitive to the variety of forms in which persons experience and live out their religious and/or spiritual beliefs, and which seeks to engage their spirituality as a resource for healing”



Spiritually competent care requires

- Practitioners to develop a basic knowledge about and appreciation for those perspectives different from their own, as well as having some kind of general framework for understanding spirituality in relation to holistic care of persons

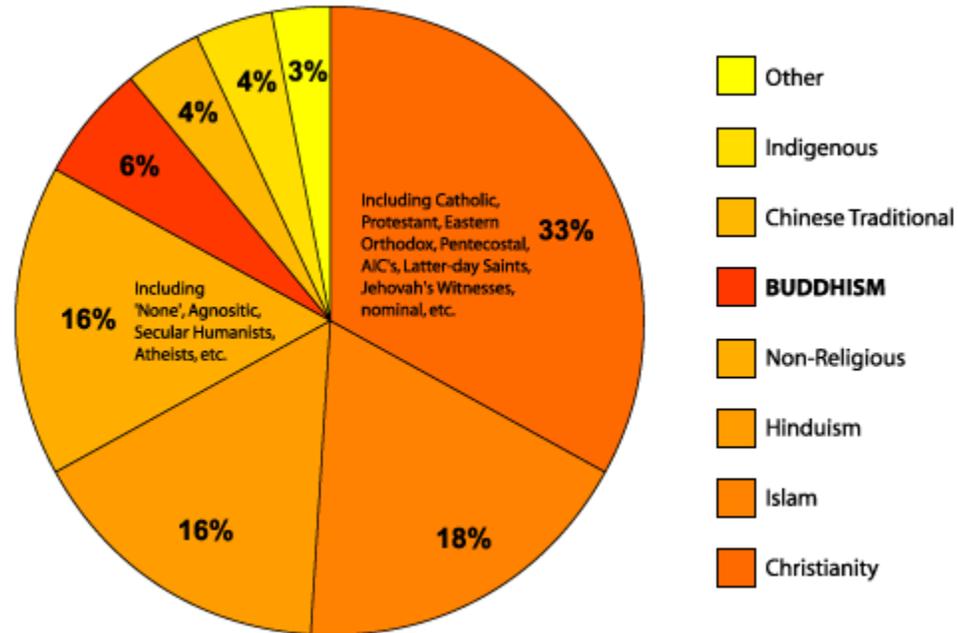


Characteristics of counselors able to provide “effective ecumenical psychotherapy”

- knowledgeable about and able to work with persons of diverse faith traditions
- able to communicate interest, understanding, and respect to persons with different religious perspectives than the therapist;
- works to understand how a person’s spirituality affects their level of functioning and sense of identity
- aware of how the therapist’s own religious beliefs may create biases in judgment
- encourages persons to make use of spiritual and religious resources in their efforts to cope and heal

World Religions

http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/images/stats/world_religions.gif





Defining children's spirituality

- “relational consciousness,” exhibited in four dimensions: between self and God or some horizon of transcendence; between self and other people; between self and world; and last, children's consciousness of relationship with themselves (Hay & Nye, 1998; Hay, 2000). From the Nottingham (UK) University Children's Spirituality Project (six- to ten- year olds response to projectives)



Four metaphors for children's spirituality (Mercer, 2006)

- Mystic – childhood experiences of being in touch with the mystery, vastness of creation (something bigger than humanity)
- Activist – children whose faith motivates them to altruism
- Child-sage – child who is wise beyond years in demonstrating compassion and insight
- Holy Fools – children who are willing to tell the truth that many see but don't want to acknowledge



Resistance to acknowledging the spirituality of children

- Minimized as “cute” or merely mimicking adults, rather than being taken as important truths to the child
- Belief that children are cognitively incapable of grasping spiritual and religious concepts
- Their beliefs may be expressed in non-verbal forms that are easily misrecognized
- Counter-transference - Some counselors bring baggage of undeveloped/unexplored spirituality or anger related to hurtful encounters with persons who identified themselves as religious



Spirituality, Religion, and Mental Health

- Religion and spirituality can be maladaptive when promoting distortions but they are not inherently unhealthy
- On the contrary, there is growing literature that supports a connection between spirituality/religiosity and physical and emotional well-being

Practical and research challenges

- Difficult to define spirituality and religion
- Difficult to measure or quantify so many of the studies are necessarily qualitative





Religion as barrier or challenge

- a family offering religious legitimation for harsh or abusive treatment of a child;
- an adolescent girl faced with a decision about terminating her pregnancy against the religious beliefs held by her parents about abortion;
- depression and other mental health difficulties in relation to a religiously stigmatized sexual orientation or incongruent gender role;



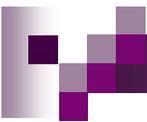
Religious and spiritual practice by children and adolescents

- Promotes *resiliency* in the face of various difficulties
- Has a positive relationship with health promoting behaviors (adolescent religious involvement appears positively associated with measures of physical health such as exercise, healthy diet, good sleep habits, and a lower rate of engaging in high-risk behaviors)
- Protective factor against depression for adolescent girls



Factors which may contribute to positive effects

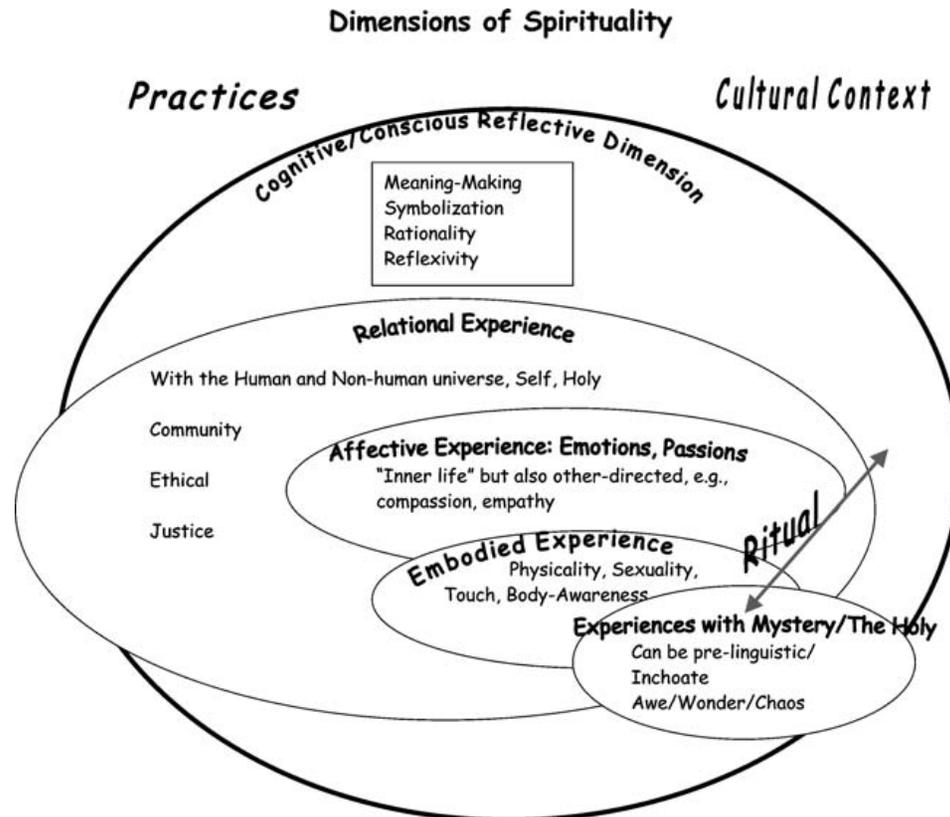
- Social support of religious community
- Worldview as resource for coping and healing (need to remember even non-religious families hold worldviews)
- *Maternal* participation in religious services is associated with greater overall life satisfaction, more involvement with family, and better skills for solving health-related problems among a randomly selected sample of 143 public school youth ages 11–13 (engagement may serve to stabilize family and provide support to mother)



How do children develop spirituality?

- Both external (social context) factors as well as internal motivation to bring meaning and order to our lives
- Fowler (1996) argues we have an innate capacity for faith and that adults do not have more faith than children they are just able to articulate it at a higher level because of their cognitive development

Dimensions of Spirituality – Mercer (2006)



Cultural Considerations

- Research has demonstrated that religious participation is particularly a resilience promoting factor for African American youth exposed to community violence, child abuse, and intimate partner violence in the home



Contemporary Forms of Child Trauma

- Neglect
- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse, Assault, and Harassment
- Community Violence and School Violence
- Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence
- Natural Disaster
- Death and loss
- Medical Trauma
- Societal Trauma
- War
- Displacement; Trafficking; Slavery
- Genocide



Effects

- Emotional
- Cognitive
- Behavioral
- Relational
- Physical
- Somatic
- Spiritual



Spiritual Effects of Trauma

- Question nature of God
- Question nature of human beings
- Question religious community





Pioneer in child trauma and spirituality – Garbarino (1996)

- Asserts that the experience of childhood traumatization functions as a kind of "reverse religious experience," a process combining overwhelming arousal and overwhelming cognitions that threatens core "meaningfulness" for the child.
- Religious and spiritual negative effects of trauma has been greatly neglected by researchers and clinicians



Barriers specific to trauma

- Focus on forgiveness
 - Mental health as an indication of one's level of faith
 - Self-blame promoted by teachings of the “The Secret”, power of positive thinking, or “you reap what you sow”
- Focus on sexual purity
- Devalue females
- Shame
- Theology to justify abuse



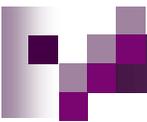
Abuse by religious leaders during childhood results in

- Decreased trust in religious institution, religious leaders, and God, particularly for girls
- Results in more significant negative effects on long term well-being
- Often involves multiple forms of abuse (emotional, verbal, physical, sexual)
- Belief that one has disappointed God



Spirituality & adult survivors of child trauma

- Literature review shows
- (1) a significant number of survivors of childhood violence change their original spiritual practices by denouncing religion altogether, changing faiths, or turning to a more personal form of spiritual practice;
- (2) A variety of factors, including type of religious background, attitude, gender, and type of abuse, interact complexly with the effects of violence on spirituality;
- (3) people often use religious forms of coping to deal with difficult situations in general; and
- (4) childhood violence survivors often mention the importance of spirituality in their survival and recovery as being a resource for healing, meaning making, and truth (can result in spiritual awakening and evolution)



Use of spirituality and religion as helpful coping strategy

- Cognitive – examples: belief that “touching my body didn’t mean touching my soul”; belief that “there is Someone who believes and loves me”; belief that “if even if I never see the perpetrator will have to answer for their actions”
- Behavioral – counseling with religious leader, trauma focused Bible studies, teachings, faith-based support groups – example “didn’t know what incest was until a guest preacher came and talked about it...”
- Relational – community of believers that may serve as “adoptive” or “spiritual” family
- Spiritual – encounters and experiences that “heal, transform, cleanse, empower, and/or deliver”



Addressing theological justifications for child abuse

- Misuse of Scripture to justify and promote shaming and humiliating child-rearing practices.
- Subsequent to abuse, particular images of God (punitive God), self and others become recreated
- Need to present a parenting model for the development of morality, empathy, and self-control without the use of violence and force; re-define use of power and authority
- Example: Spare the rod, spoil the child. Need to examine the use of the rod to guide not to beat.

Religious awareness



- Family violence occurs across religious and spiritual lines
- Important to separate culture from religious doctrine
- Address interpretation of text
- Loyalty, sacrifice, and peace-keeping upheld over self preservation
- Important to have community based interventions co-lead/endorsed by religious leaders



Religious Teachings on Treatment of Others

- **Baha'i Faith:** Baha'u'llah, Gleanings Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself.
Buddhism: The Buddha, Udana-Varga 5.18 Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.
Christianity: Jesus, Matthew 7:17 In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.
- **Confucianism:** Confucius, Analects 15.23 One word which sums up the basis of all good conduct: loving-kindness. Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.
Hinduism: Mahabharata 5:15-17 This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.
Islam: The Prophet Muhammad, 13th of the 40 Hadiths of Nawawi Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.

More Religious Teachings on Treatment of Others

- **Judaism:** Hillel, Talmud, Shabbath 31a
What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.
- **Sikhism:** Guru Granth Sahib, pg. 1299
I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all.
- **Taoism:** Lao T'zu, T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien, 213-218
Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.

- **Unitarianism:** Unitarian principle
We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.
- **Zoroastrianism:** Shayast-na-Shayast 13.29
Do not do to others whatever is injurious to yourself.





Jewish Teachings and Response Example

<http://www.kehillasynagogue.org/abusepolicy.htm>

- *"...on the day when God made humans, they were fashioned in the image of God"* Genesis 5:1
- *The realization that every human being is God's image makes an unambiguous demand upon us.* Rabbi Arthur Green

- "The Committee Against Abuse (of a particular synagogue).. and all those involved in responding to a situation of abuse will be guided by the following concerns:
 1. to protect those who are or have been abused;
 2. to protect the safety of other congregants;
 3. to do what we can to stop the abuse;
 4. to establish consequences for continued abusive behavior;
 5. to encourage the abuser to make the behavioral and long-term emotional changes necessary to be a thriving member of the community, moving towards making teshuva (the process of turning away from wrongdoing involving repentance, contrition and repairing what can be repaired);
 6. to make sure that survivors of abuse, those accused of abuse, and those who have perpetrated abuse, are treated with respect in recognition of the divine image within them."



Jewish Rabbi's response to child abuse

- From the moment of infancy and beyond, the way a parent acts toward their child forms in the child's consciousness a paradigm for how God relates to us. The primary role of a parent, therefore, is to communicate to the child: You are loved and cherished. You are unique and special, creative and talented. You are cared for and protected. You are never alone.
- If a parent is untrustworthy and uncaring, it subconsciously sets into the child's mind that God must somehow be the same. This is an emotional handicap that can be difficult to overcome later in life.

With blessings from Jerusalem,

Rabbi Shraga Simmons

http://judaism.about.com/library/3_askrabbi_o/bl_simmons_childabuse.htm



Muslim texts addressing IPV

<http://www.doa.state.nc.us/cfw/dv&faith.doc>

- ***"The most perfect in faith, amongst believers is he who is best in manner and kindest to his wife."***
- ***"I recommend that you treat women with goodness. "***
- -Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)
- ***"O Mankind! We created you from a single soul, male and female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may come to know one another."***
- -Qur'an 49:13
- ***"And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and he has put love and mercy between your (hearts)..."***
- -Qur'an 30:21



Muslim Families Addressing Family Trauma

- While authentic Islamic teachings do not promote violence against women, religious teachings are sometimes misinterpreted and misused to justify family abuse.
- These justifications often rely on and are reflective of cultural practices within certain Muslim communities rather than true Islamic principles.
- While men and women are considered equal before God according to the Qur'an, contrasting cultural norms and customs that ignore or support the use of violence against women must be considered. Muslim victims may reject interventions believed to conflict with their cultural or religious practices, turning instead to their communities of faith.
- It is important for interventions to be community-based and integrated with religious leaders



Bible Scriptures about children

- *Genesis 21:16*
Let me not look upon the death of a child.
- *Deuteronomy 4:10*
... that they may teach their children also
- *1 Samuel 3:8*
Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy.
- *Psalms 68:5*
Father to the fatherless
- *Psalms 131:2*
... like a child is quieted at its mother's breast
- *Proverbs 22:6*
Train up a child in the way he should go.
- *Proverbs 31:8*
Open your mouths for the rights of all who are left desolate.
- *Ecclesiastes 12:1*
Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.
- *Isaiah 9:6*
For unto us a child is born.
- *Isaiah 11:6*
And a little child shall lead them.
- *Mark 7:27*
Let the children first be fed.
- *Mark 9:37*
Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.
- *Mark 10:13-16*
Let the children come to me; do not hinder them.
- *John 21:15*
Feed my lambs.



Christian Response to Child Abuse

http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/CBNTeachingSheets/keys-Overcoming_Child_Abuse.aspx - Excerpt

- The Bible gives much practical advise on the subject of child-rearing. "Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it," says the writer of Proverbs (22:6). Parents are clearly cautioned to take steps to correct foolishness which "is bound up in the heart of a child" (Prov. 22:15).
- Parental discipline is essential, but some parents view these Scriptures as giving absolute control over their children. This is not true. God's Word should never be used as a license for abuse. Parents need to discipline their children, but they must keep their own emotions and actions in check (Eph. 6:4, Col. 3:21). In God's eyes there simply is no justification for abuse.

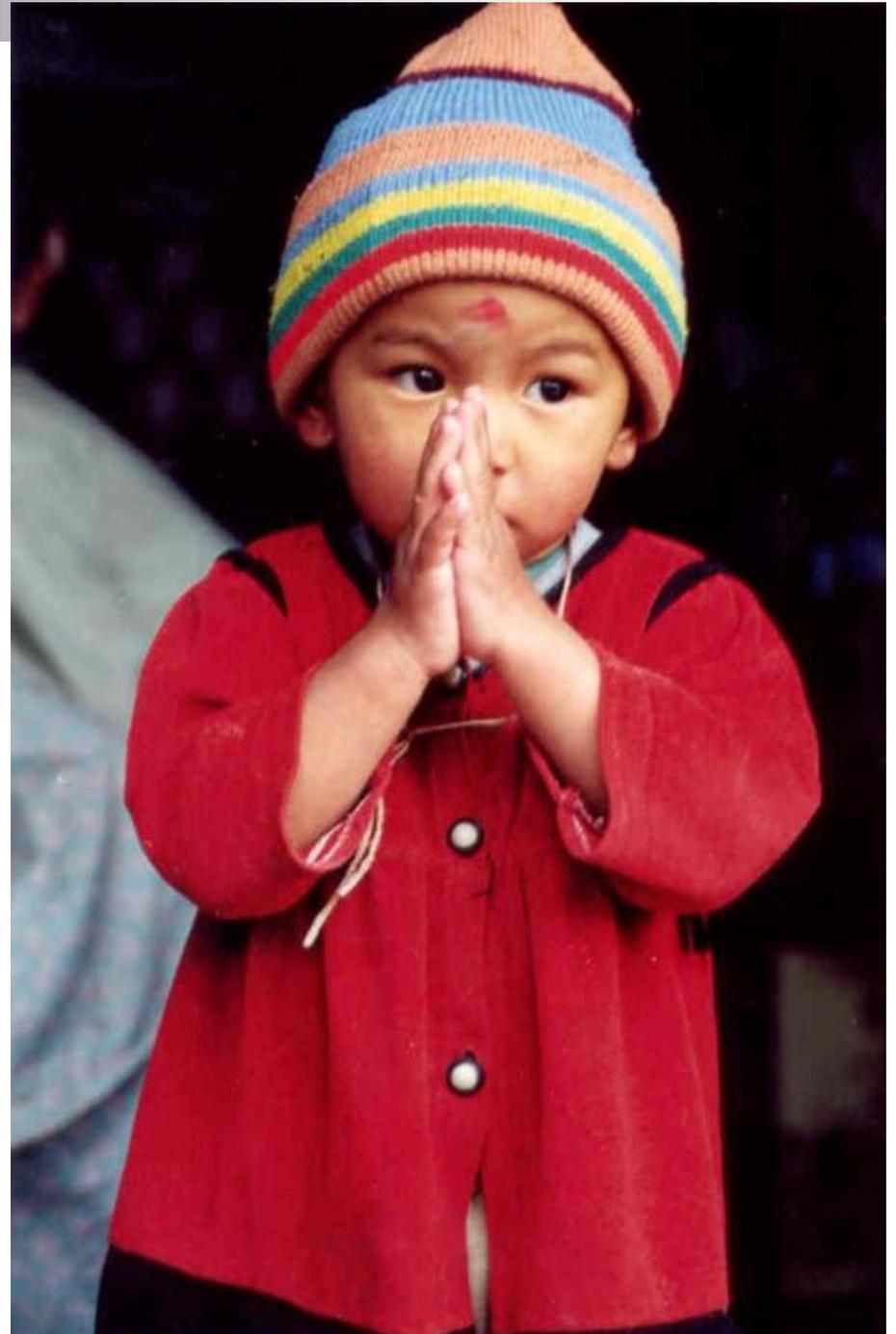


Christian Scriptures to Address Family Violence

- ***Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are. (1 Cor. 3:16-17)***
- ***He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him. (Prov. 13:24)***
- ***Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. (Col. 3:19)***
- ***Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Eph. 5:21)***
- ***My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.***
- ***And I say, "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. Yea, I would wander afar, I would lodge in the wilderness. I would haste to find me a shelter from the raging wind and tempest." (Ps. 55:4-8)***

Hinduism

- A driving principle for Hindus is *ahimsa*, nonviolence
- As with other communities, this principle is not always applied to the discipline of children
- Have to collaboratively provide and promote non-violent discipline strategies across systems (family, school, community, etc.)



Assessment should attend to

- Child and Family beliefs/values
- Child and Family daily practices
- Spiritual or Religious Community Involvement





Rituals

- Jewish tradition of telling narrative of survival
- Christian tradition of testimony and baptism
- Muslim tradition of atonement
- Buddhist tradition of meditation
- Traditional African religions' tradition of corporate dance of passage, cleansing, warfare, celebration, and transcendence
- Therapy Rituals



Spiritual/Religious-based trauma recovery activities for survivors

(taken from presenter's book Thriving in the wake of trauma)

- Saying or writing a prayer
- Reading religious or spiritual text
- Use of the creative arts
- Connection with nature
- Meditation and visualization
- Talking about your faith with someone you trust
- Activism

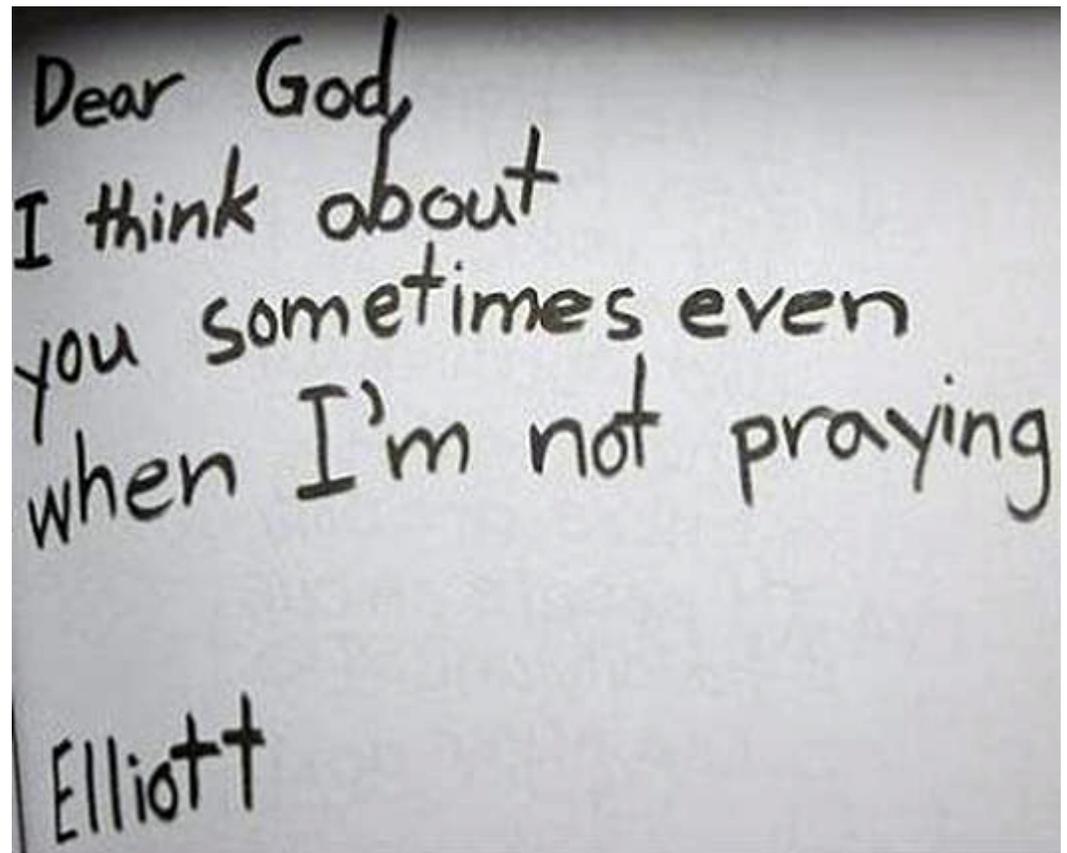
Spiritual Cultural Competence

- Awareness – biases and values (label people “hyper-religious”)
 - Knowledge
 - Skills
- (Sue & Sue)



Case Examples

- “Walking in your healing”
- Brown girl – poem

A photograph of a whiteboard with handwritten text in black marker. The text is a poem. The first line is "Dear God,". The second line is "I think about". The third line is "you sometimes even". The fourth line is "when I'm not praying". At the bottom left, the name "Elliott" is written.

Dear God,
I think about
you sometimes even
when I'm not praying

Elliott



What can religious communities do?

- Preach/lecture/teach/minister, acknowledging and addressing family violence as a serious spiritual issue
- Display posters in common areas; place brochures in more private areas
- Acknowledge and denounce common myths and misconceptions about family violence; reject excuses for abuse openly and routinely
- Encourage your congregation members to collect donations and resources for local violence prevention/intervention programs; coordinate your efforts with the local program, allowing the program to identify needs and any concerns that need to be addressed regarding confidentiality and safety
- Have a survivor speak as an invited guest (if appropriate and safe)
- Sponsor activities and events that help raise awareness

Conclusions

- Many people endorse engagement in spiritual and/or religious practices and belief systems including children
- Trauma affects children's spirituality
- Spirituality can also serve as a positive coping strategy for survivors of childhood trauma
- Counselors should assess for spirituality and religion among child trauma survivors and where appropriate incorporate into interventions



