

# Religion, Spirituality and Addiction Recovery: Introduction

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Religion, spirituality, non-religion, and the secular (Lee 2014, 2015) are unstable categories that are nonetheless routinely reified by academics, clinicians and practitioners alike, and positioned as fundamental to experiences of addiction recovery. For instance, addiction is often framed, dramatically, as a spiritual malady, yet, just as often, as simply a poor moral choice. While ideas associated with religion or spirituality play out differently in those contrasting diagnoses, the role of religion and spirituality in their aetiology is evident. We (Wendy Dossett and Liam Metcalf-White) argue that the categories of religion, spirituality, and non-religion, as they relate to addiction recovery, need further analysis than they receive in the clinical literature. This literature frequently presents them as extra “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988); either functionally worthwhile or not (Szalavitz 2017); rather than as embedded in the very culture and discourses in which addiction and recovery are named and experienced. We argue for a focus on the latter as more productive for an understanding of the field.

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This special edition of *Implicit Religion* engages critically and theoretically with the language of religion, spirituality, and non-religion as articulated within different presentations of addiction and recovery. The issue maps recovery across a variety of pathways and modalities that include, but are not limited to faith based groups, medication-assisted pathways, and Twelve Step Mutual Aid groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA), in a variety of global settings (the United Kingdom and United States, Mexico and Canada). Contributors examine the terms religion, spirituality, and non-religion as found in these settings and as found within culturally mediated and politicized notions of recovery such as the Visible Recovery Advocacy Movement and within popular culture. The articles explore the ways in which conceptualizations of religion, spirituality, and non-religion, are at once fashioned by and medi-

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ated through specific framings of addiction and recovery. They draw data from a diverse range of environments, shaped by presentations of Atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR) and demonstrate the complex ways in which agency, creativity, power, rhetoric, fellowship and activism emerge through these identities. Contributors also use prisms of class, ethnicity, gender, and stigma to illuminate liberative and oppressive aspects of addiction recovery discourses.

The majority of articles in this issue, including our own, utilize ethnographic and qualitative research methods. In terms of the academic literature, it is much more common to find qualitative and ethnographic studies of addiction and other examples of substance use than it is to find such studies of recovery. These tend to be more clinical and quantitative. There is a great deal more to be known about the lives and experiences of people in long-term recovery. This is now being recognised; for example, a recent conference (March 2019) held by the Substance Use and Associated Behaviours (SUAB) Research Group at Manchester Metropolitan University was devoted to the subject. This special issue contributes to that wider effort and considers a focus on lived-experience and discursive testimonies to be central in enabling researchers to tease out intricacies, nuances, and unspoken discourses of power and politics.

Rather than conceptualise the categories religion, spirituality, and non-religion as in some way outside of human activity, we argue that the genealogies of these terms should be examined according to context, language, history, and power (Asad 2003; Beckford 2003; Cotter 2017; McCutcheon 1997; Miller 2015). This renders the endeavour to seek out actual definitions, according to alleged innate and essential characteristics, as a largely meritless task. However, this is exactly what several scholars of religion, healthcare, and addiction recovery have attempted. For instance, Kenneth Pargament (1997) and Harold Koenig *et al.* (2012) name a correlation between belief in God and positive health and wellbeing. This approach positions the object of study as “belief” which itself involves a problematic essentialising move. Its focus on “God” has also been challenged by Galen and Kloet (2011). The articles in this special issue seek instead to map the different ways in which the categories of religion, spirituality, and consequently non-religion, are absorbed and deployed, shaped and reshaped by their interaction with the addiction recovery milieu. The contributors represent a significant range of scholars and scholar-practitioners, from very early career to the more established and well-known.

Jennifer Hanh’s article provides a scholarly (and archivally informed) historical account of the emergence of Twelve Step spirituality shaped on the one hand by the exclusive Protestantism of the Oxford Group and on

the other by a Perennialism which mediated what Ann Taves (2016, 117) calls a “common core” of spirituality. This mix, combined with an emphasis on individual choice valorised by the early members of Alcoholics Anonymous, established a distinctive style of spirituality, which Hanh argues fails to fit the standard Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) mould defined by scholars such as Nancy Ammerman (2014) and Linda Mercadante (2014). Central to Hanh’s argument is her observation of the practice of deflation of self and focus on others, and she names a ‘sacralization of social relationships’ as the heart of Twelve Step Spirituality.

In the second article focused on the Twelve Steps, Paul McClure takes a biographical case-study approach to what he calls the ‘spiritual makeover’ which occurs in the lives of people in long-term recovery. He frames this makeover in the terms of “post-Christian Spirituality” (Houtman and Aupers 2007), pointing to the development of what he calls a ‘durable spiritual identity’ which eschews both religion and secularism. He positions Alcoholics Anonymous as an organisation which functions to sustain this identity, either alone or alongside other institutional resources.

Ethan Sharp’s article explores a research site in which the Twelve Steps have some valence, yet his participants do not identify as fellowship members. He examines the category of spirituality among men’s addiction rehabilitation groups in Northern Mexico. The groups in which Sharp has undertaken extensive ethnography use some of the practices of Twelve Step fellowships, such as storytelling and sharing, but may not be explicitly ‘Step’ focused. Sharp argues that performative events such as the anniversaries at his rehabilitation center research site, are a viable way in which to explore spirituality among participants. Sharp argues that for most groups in his study the category of spirituality was used as an important and transformative placeholder, although its meaning was not always consistent or clear. In several cases, it was used to signify the Christian God, but in others, its meaning was more ambiguous.

Lymarie Rodriguez-Morales’ study offers an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the autobiographies of young adult men in Twelve Step Fellowships. Rodriguez-Morales’ findings track a shift in emphasis over the recovery life-course from pragmatic abstinence in early recovery to an increasing preoccupation with questions of existential meaning, and a deepening sense of personal and community responsibility. These concerns of longer-term recovery are considered within the Twelve Step context as spiritual concerns, and Rodriguez-Morales places the development of non-gender-normative values such as “belonging,” “authenticity,” “care,” and “love” in the context of a “spiritual masculine self” that is developed and performed with increasing confidence by her participants.

Linda Mercadante's article draws a clear distinction between what she names as a standard SBNR motivation; namely, to have a spiritual experience, from that of Alcoholics Anonymous members she has interviewed who have a rather more pragmatic motivation; namely, to stop drinking. She casts the SBNR environment as one characterised by "short-term involvement and lack of common organizing principles, practices and texts," contrasting significantly with AA's "group commitment and focus on behavioural standards." She notes a class and privilege dissonance between the two environments, in that "rich and poor, the over-worked and the out-of-work, mainstream and marginalized, all can find a home in AA" whereas SBNR engagement requires money and time. At the same time, she assents to Galen Watts' (2018) picture of a world liberalising around AA, making what was once a bastion of liberal spirituality appear like a relic of a bygone age.

Zachary Munro's article qualitatively examines the experiences of 'non-religious' members of Alcoholics Anonymous in Canada. Munro describes the challenges, often intersecting with factors such as sexuality, that several of his participants faced regarding identifying as non-religious and working the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Munro argues that while non-religiosity is often characterized by absence, his participants do in fact positively construct empowering and recovery-orientated meanings in a variety of ways that they label as non-religious. Munro also examines the alleged 'boundaries' between conceptions of 'religious', 'spiritual', and 'secular' wings of Alcoholics Anonymous in Canada, emphasising the ways in which individuals and groups seek to construct Alcoholics Anonymous as non-religious and the wider implications of this move.

Wendy Dossett focuses on a recovery environment which is largely separate from the Twelve Step episteme, though there are elements of intersection and influence. She traces the history of Buddhist Addiction Recovery, and, through qualitative interviews with some of the world's most well-known Buddhist recovery leaders and teachers, explores philosophical and epistemological diversity across a range of pathways. She shows how the teachers respond to some debates in addiction studies around ideas of powerlessness and choice, around the disease concept, and around the identities of "addict/alcoholic." She argues that Buddhist Addiction Recovery fits neither into a picture of Buddhism as a neoliberal lifestyle supplement, nor into the frame of therapeutic Buddhism; rather, Buddhist Addiction Recovery is a distinctive form of Buddhist Modernism deserving of separate attention.

Finally, Liam Metcalf-White's article examines the use of the category spirituality among people identifying with experiences of recovery within

the Visible Recovery Advocacy Movement (VRAM). Drawing on qualitative research, he examines a diverse array of identifications with spirituality that his participants present functionally in the context of their recovery transformations. He argues that while his participants draw from a range of diverse recovery modalities, the rhetoric of spirituality has trickled down largely because of the significant influence of Twelve Step fellowships like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) within the VRAM. Although many of his respondents conceptualise spirituality as privatised, he demonstrates that they are nearly all concurrently tied to and involved with communities, including, but also extending beyond the VRAM. Metcalf-White theorises the category of spirituality as a floating signifier onto which participants inscribe meanings according to their social and cultural location. For several of his participants, spirituality indicated empowerment, community, purpose, and a source of altruism that led to caring for the recovery and wider-community at the levels of policy, practice and street-level mobilisation.

We, the editors, hope this special issue will speak back to study of religion scholars, addiction recovery practitioners, and the wider-recovery movement. Examining the concepts of spirituality, religion and non-religion at the intersection of community, gender, healthcare, politics, stigma and social justice reveals them not as abstract or one-dimensional terms, but rather, complex placeholders that have implications at the micro, meso, and macro levels of society. This has significant implications for clinicians and addiction recovery service providers attempting to negotiate the complexities of claims of religion, spirituality, and secular among different recovery communities and groups. The aim of this special edition is not only to demonstrate the diversity of these categories, but also, to frame them as discursive practices rather than as hermetically sealed ‘objects’ of study. Furthermore, discourses on religion, spirituality, and non-religion among people identifying as in recovery offer a window through which to consider the historical and contemporary usage of these classifications, as embedded in community as much as in “individual” experience.

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