Religion, Spirituality, and Trauma: An Introduction

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Current research trends suggest that about half of all people will experience directly, or vicariously, some form of trauma over the course of their lifespan. Recent societal events, such as high profile child abuse cases and scandals, increased rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide rates among returning veterans, and some of the worst natural disasters recorded in history have brought greater attention to issues of trauma. With this have come several advances in our understanding and treatment of trauma. As a result, this area of study has seen an increase in the diversity of topics investigated and sophistication of research methodologies implored. Despite these significant gains, there is still much to be learned about the unique role of religion and spirituality in relation to trauma. Thus, the purpose of this special issue is to contribute to this burgeoning body of literature. Before describing the work contained in the pages that follow, we briefly share some background about where our interest and work on faith and trauma began.

This special volume has evolved out of our shared professional and personal experiences. Both of us, at different times in our personal and professional lives have been deeply moved by first-hand accounts of trauma. I (Aten) had just finished graduate school and had moved to South Mississippi to start my first academic appointment. Little did I know that Hurricane Katrina would strike the Gulf Coast just six days later. I saw first hand how devastating and far-reaching trauma can be. Perhaps even more importantly, I saw first hand how the church cared for trauma survivors and how faith helped bring about meaning and recovery to survivors. Within two months my research team had completed our first study on religion and trauma among Hurricane Katrina survivors. It was these early experiences after Hurricane Katrina—and years that followed of living in, studying, and working with communities affected by this disaster—that has led me to continue this work in other regions domestically and internationally, and ultimately to my involvement in this special volume.

One of us (Walker) was working on a child abuse treatment team in a secular community mental health center near his hometown in Canton, Ohio for his pre-doctoral internship. I (Walker) remember working on a Child Abuse Treatment Team that year, and seeing a client who had been beaten to the point that he had broken bones. I was horrified, and shocked to learn that a child, living twenty minutes from where I had grown up, had been treated this way by his family. In attempting to help another child client to process his reactions to his abusive experience, I once asked him if he had talked to God about what had happened. The client responded by saying that he was “not sure that God could help.” In that moment, I realized that nothing in the course of study in my PhD, my theology degree, or my integrative training had adequately prepared me for how to respond. I have since spent a good deal of my professional life trying to understand the process of healing from child abuse from the perspective of survivors and their therapists.

In this special issue, we take the opportunity to learn from the research and clinical experiences of a number of Christian mental health professionals as well as some professionals from other disciplines to better understand how to respond therapeutically and pastorally to traumas of various kinds. In the first article, Victor Vieth, the Director of the National Child Protection Training Center, presents a theological model for applying the law and gospel to perpetrators and survivors of child abuse. Next, Everett L. Worthington and Diane Langberg consider religious considerations involved in treating trauma among veterans of war. Next, O'Grady examines the role of spirituality in recovery from the recent earthquake in Haiti among native Haitians. Afterward, Maltby and Hall present a case...
study illustrating therapeutic responses involving inter-subjectivity and spirituality among an adult survivor of abuse. Next, Tran empirically examines the role of religion and spirituality in moderating the development of PTSD and depression among veterans being served in inpatient treatment settings. In the next article, Vieth, Tchividjian, Walker, and Knodel present a call for preventing and responding to child abuse in churches and Christian organizations. Afterward, Leavell examines the religious and spiritual coping experiences of clergy in southern Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. We conclude the special issue by reflecting on the issues that the authors have risen and suggesting areas for future study.

Our main goal for this special volume is to contribute to the field's scientific understanding of the role and relationship between religion, spirituality, and trauma. We also hope that this work will begin to help improve the ways in which these topics are understood and addressed in research and practice alike. Further, we hope that this special volume might spark interest among researchers and practitioners alike to share their work and lessons learned, so that together, we can begin to bring greater understanding, hope, and healing to those affected by trauma.

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