

Chapter 86

Making the Unbearable Bearable through Existential Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the case is made that spirituality can indeed have a significant impact upon practical life. Existential spirituality refers to the way one gives meaning and purpose to one's life. The value of spirituality is best appreciated when one's life undergoes an existential crisis, particularly when a worldview, which was assumed to give sense to one's life, no longer has the legitimacy it once had. When a religious, traditional or customary doctrine or worldview loses its authority through an existential crisis, the individual often experiences nihilism. This can often make an experience of hardship quite unbearable because one's suffering is unable to reference any grand narrative or framework of meaning to give sense to one's situation. Using Kierkegaard's three stages of existence, it is argued that making one's spirituality more authentic by taking personal responsibility on an individual level, might be able to make unbearable experiences more bearable.

INTRODUCTION

Spirituality is found in the very core of our being and because it is so deep its impact upon everyday living is not often recognised. However, it usually receives our attention especially when it is 'weak' or absent typically perhaps when we are being deeply reflective or during a difficult time in our lives such as when suffering or confronting an existential crisis. This is echoed by Debats (2000, p. 102) who explains that "[w]e are reminded of Frankl (1973), who stated that, in general, the issue of the meaning of one's personal life has no relevance until some personal or professional crisis occurs." Often this can occur when one's worldview, usually established in traditions, doctrine and 'authoritative' representations for life, fail the individual in particular contexts. When one lacks an adequate spirituality – i.e. when one can be understood as 'spiritless' – the impact can be quite obvious through feelings of ennui, boredom, anxiety, sorrow, uncertainty, angst, depression, emptiness, meaninglessness, or even as an

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unbearable grief in which one is unable to navigate purposely through a particular situation. The need to become spiritual, in an authentic manner in such a situation, is understood to potentially have a huge impact. This is because an authentic spirituality can enable one to come to terms with and work through one's present condition by finding meaning and purpose beyond the immediate situation. Such an impact can therefore make a difficult or even a seemingly unbearable experience to become bearable. In this chapter, it is argued that making our spirituality more authentic in an existentialist sense, can possibly enable lives to become more meaningful – even in some apparently meaningless or unbearable situations.

SPIRIT, SPIRITUALITY, AND THE RELIGIOUS

It can sometimes be difficult to take spirituality seriously, especially regarding its potential role or impact upon 'real' practical life in the 'here and now'. One of the problems that has contributed to this is a tendency to reify what we understand by 'spirit'. Doing so, leads to questions such as what is the 'stuff' which spirit consists of? Is it partly divine? Is it immortal? From the Greek term *pneuma* and the Latin term *spīritus* we understand that spirit refers to a life-giving breath of vigour and as such it is not a 'thing' but rather is more like a life-giving 'force'. Consequently, spirituality can be understood to refer to the desires, interests and purposes which energise us, and also give inspiration to our existence. Consequently, spirituality is not a commodity that we can obtain, but it refers to our very being where, for example, being either full of spirit or being spiritless can be aspects of the manner or the way in which we participate in living our lives and facing our challenges.

In addition to avoiding reification in order to take spirituality more seriously, it is also important to recognise that spirituality is not dependent upon religion (Webster, 2009). Spirituality refers to the ultimate meaning and purpose for life and it can often appear religious. However, it is important to recognise that spirituality is not identical with religion because spirituality is pertinent for all persons – both the religious and the non-religious. Religion can tend to represent a particular body of doctrine which an adherent can obtain and so it can be related to epistemology. Smith (1978, p. 20) usefully recognised that the Latin *religio*, being the root for 'religion', has a much "more stable history" as an adjective rather than as a noun substantive concept. Hence other derivatives such as *relegare* and *religare* refer to the manner in which activities – such as worship – are undertaken.

In a similar sense, Caputo (2001, p. 43) has identified that in the Middle Ages the term *religio* was understood to be a virtue and hence it is more ontological in nature because it refers to the attributes of people rather than statements of knowledge or beliefs located beyond people usually in sacred texts. This understanding has led him to state elsewhere that "to be 'religious' in its deepest sense is to be a searcher, living in search of something" and he contrasts this with those who "are satisfied with the reality that sits under our noses" (Caputo, 2007, p. 38) who are not questioning, doubting or grappling.

Being religious refers to a way-of-life or a way of living, while having a religion can refer to a particular set of doctrine, which can be obtained. In this context spirituality is associated with being religious because it represents a life of continual searching and meaning-making, of living the questions. This is in contrast to one who has 'found' answers and is no longer doubting, searching or questioning and has succumbed to what Dewey (1929) refers to as the quest for certainty. The spirituality of religious persons pertains to how they relate to and live out their religion and this often occurs at an individual and very personal level. Being able to live a good life and being able to die a good death necessarily requires persons to have a rigorously developed spirituality, which may or may not make reference to any religion.

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