

Through wisdom, evidence, practical experience, and wholehearted care, Daryl and Sara offer readers a much needed and timely resource in *Sacred Unraveling*. The authors masterfully weave their expertise, sensitivity, and humility into the book, while honoring the nuance and complexity of walking alongside clients navigating religious change. Whether you are a mental health practitioner, educator, student, or someone reflecting upon your own spiritual or religious journey, I highly recommend this book.

—**HOLLY K. OXHANDLER, PhD, MSW**, PROFESSOR AND ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR RESEARCH, DIANA R. GARLAND SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK, BAYLOR UNIVERSITY, WACO, TX; AUTHOR, *THE SOUL OF THE HELPER: SEVEN STAGES TO SEEING THE SACRED WITHIN YOURSELF SO YOU CAN SEE IT IN OTHERS*

A long-overdue book that bridges the gap between spiritual and existential perspectives in psychotherapy. This very timely, innovative, and illuminating contribution speaks to the growing numbers of people who struggle with the “existential chasm” that arises when they disengage from religious life. Drawing on recent empirical research and clinical wisdom, the Van Tongerens provide valuable perspectives and tools to help clients who are grappling with profound existential concerns—meaninglessness, isolation, freedom, death anxiety, loss of self—as they deal with religious and spiritual change. An important addition to any clinician’s library.

—**KENNETH I. PARGAMENT, PhD**, PROFESSOR EMERITUS, BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY, BOWLING GREEN, OH; AUTHOR, *SPIRITUALLY INTEGRATED PSYCHOTHERAPY: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE SACRED*, AND COAUTHOR, *WORKING WITH SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES IN PSYCHOTHERAPY: FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE*

Therapists who want guidance for the complexities of the current religious and existential landscape will benefit from reading *Sacred Unraveling*. The authors combine clinical wisdom, scientific research, and authentic understanding to offer a well-grounded model of therapeutic care for clients experiencing changes in religious identities. This is the best book in this growing clinical domain.

—**STEVEN J. SANDAGE, PhD, LP**, ALBERT AND JESSIE DANIELSEN PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION & THEOLOGY, BOSTON UNIVERSITY, BOSTON, MA

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Many people who do not identify as religious still carry deep spiritual, even religious, needs into psychotherapy—a pattern we have observed for years in our research at McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School. *Sacred Unraveling* thoughtfully addresses this phenomenon, integrating clinical insight with social psychological science in a way that is both rigorous and deeply practical.

—**DAVID H. ROSMARIN, PhD, ABPP**, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL, BOSTON, MA; DIRECTOR, SPIRITUALITY & MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM, MCLEAN HOSPITAL, BELMONT, MA

How should a clinician engage a client who is undergoing existential anxiety when the once relied upon resource of traditional religion no longer seems to work? This team, through a skillful blend of psychological science and clinical relevance, provides a convincing answer. Two thumbs up!

—**PETER C. HILL, PhD**, ROSEMEAD SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY (EMERITUS), BIOLA UNIVERSITY, LA MIRADA, CA

Deeply grounded in empirical research and woven together with clinical wisdom, *Sacred Unraveling* is an indispensable guide for those seeking to help people navigate the complexities of religious change.

—**JULIE J. EXLINE, PhD**, RESEARCH DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF PERCEPTUAL STUDIES, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHIATRY AND NEUROBEHAVIORAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA HEALTH SYSTEM, CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA

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INTRODUCTION

An Existential Unsettling

Increasingly, more people in the United States are rethinking religion. Recent trends have highlighted the rise of the nonreligious, including religious *donees*, who have left their religion. Others have found their previous faith distasteful or untenable and have sought new religious traditions, whereas some have sought a nonreligious spirituality. Still others may revise their religious or spiritual beliefs in ways that result in greater maturation or a deepening of their faith. Religious and spiritual change abounds.

Amid this sea of religious and spiritual change, we are seeing an Existential Unsettling. Steadily, more people are experiencing heightened existential anxiety. Certainly, many things can contribute to increased angst and feelings of disequilibrium, such as a volatile political climate, economic fluctuations, ongoing environmental degradation, and the growing pressures of living in an individualistic and capitalistic culture. But the loss or revision of religion should not be underestimated. Disconnecting from or rethinking one's religion can be psychologically unmooring. And although it can bring freedom and authenticity, it can also evoke groundlessness. Given that religion offers answers to some of life's biggest questions, religious and spiritual changes can feel disorienting, daunting, or depressing. It often can give way to stress

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and strain in a variety of areas in life. For many who have been hurt by religion, their trust in religious institutions and leaders has eroded, and people are less likely to bring such concerns to clergy or members of their congregation. Instead, more are seeking help from trained mental health therapists. Even if you do not specialize in religious or spiritual issues, almost assuredly they are likely to surface in your work with clients.

Consider this: The majority of people in the United States are religious, but therapists and helping professionals are largely nonreligious (Vieten et al., 2013). A survey of more than 300 American Psychological Association psychologists revealed that fewer than half screen for religion and spiritual issues with their clients (Hathaway et al., 2004), and fewer than one third discuss religion or spirituality with their clients (Vieten et al., 2016). Aside from personal religiousness, the next best predictor of whether clinicians feel competent to address religious and spiritual issues in therapy is whether therapists receive graduate training or continuing education on integrating these themes into their practice (Oxhandler et al., 2024). However, most clinicians—somewhere between 50% and 80%—never received such training (Vieten et al., 2016). Thus, many clinicians are underprepared to engage clients in this area. And when clients are experiencing religious or spiritual change, it often vaults such concerns into the center stage of therapy. If you are not personally attuned to these issues, and you didn't receive the proper training, you might be missing something rather important in the lives of your clients. This book fills that gap.

Even in the absence of religion, people's spiritual and existential needs remain strong. Unfortunately, spiritual needs are often unmet or unacknowledged in clinical practice. Indeed, spirituality is an important, yet often neglected, feature of the therapeutic relationship—not because therapists don't want to address these needs, but often because they don't know how.

As people's beliefs and behaviors change, so do their needs. In fact, in the absence of religion, or when religious identities and beliefs change, there is good reason to argue that existential and spiritual concerns may become an even more valuable and rich area of exploration in the therapeutic setting. However, many therapists feel uncomfortable or underprepared to discuss topics of religion and spirituality with their clients. Particularly among psychologists, many clinicians are not religious (Vieten et al., 2013) and may not see the value (or perhaps may primarily see the harm) of religious beliefs and practices. Despite commonly surfacing in therapy, this aspect of clinical training and therapeutic understanding is often lacking. The purpose of this book is to help equip mental health professionals to address their clients' dynamic needs for existential meaning and spirituality amid religious and spiritual change.

OUR PERSPECTIVE

We approach this topic by blending two unique perspectives. Sara is a licensed clinical social worker, with close to 2 decades of clinical practice experience. Much of her clinical work has focused on helping clients explore existential concerns, wrestle with religious and spiritual issues, engage with suffering, and navigate life transitions. Daryl is a social psychologist whose research focuses on religion, meaning, and existential concerns. His empirical work has adopted an existential approach to understanding religion, including pioneering work on people leaving religion. In 2024, he published a book explaining the process of leaving religion and how to cultivate a meaningful, flourishing life (*Done: How to Flourish After Leaving Religion*) that may benefit many of your clients. Prior to this, most books about religious changes, or what is commonly known as *deconstruction*, were memoir based. Although important, overall scientific research on this topic had not yet been synthesized. In this book, we apply recent peer-reviewed scientific research to clinical work. Together, we integrate rigorous psychological science with hard-won clinical wisdom to offer best practices for engaging clients who are experiencing some form of religious or spiritual change. Our goal is to make the research easy to understand and the clinical applications direct, useful, and rooted in the very best available current research. Our hope is that you will be able to apply these ideas, theories, and research to your own methods and approaches so they are integrated into your assessment and clinical practice.

Some clinicians readily see the value in addressing spirituality in the therapy room. Others don't. Increasingly, therapists—and their governing bodies—have come to see religious and spiritual competencies as a cultural competency, much like attuning to the various cultural identities any client brings into your working relationship (Vieten et al., 2013, 2016). Religion is heavily influenced by culture, and it may be helpful to view religion as a form of culture (Cohen, 2009). Just as you might be less familiar with cultures that vary from your own, with curiosity and respect you can develop a deeper understanding of both the value and nuances of a variety of different cultures and expressed identities. Religion and spirituality should be understood similarly. They can be expressed in myriad ways and diverse forms, and these features of human life play a large role in the lives of your clients. As we present in this book, there's good reason to pay attention to both of these forces, especially considering the changing landscape of religion in the United States and around the world.

A further wrinkle is that religion and spirituality are fluid concepts. People move in and out of religion. Perceptions of spirituality change. Sometimes, religion is a source of strength; other times, it is a source of struggle. Religious

terms can mean one thing to one client and a decidedly different thing to another. And how people understand and express their spirituality is unique. Social scientific research suggests that certain key themes, strong motives, and recently identified patterns might help you better understand and address the dynamic religious and spirituality needs of your clients—including those who are firmly nonreligious.

We discuss how a changing religious landscape, something called the Great Disillusionment (Van Tongeren, 2024), means that more people are wrestling with, questioning, or walking away from their religion. Depending on their religious past, they may have a unique set of psychological needs that will most likely emerge in therapy. Even when a client is confidently atheist or agnostic, having left a religion means they likely are still contending with a lingering “religious residue” that persists long after deidentifying from their faith (Van Tongeren, DeWall, Chen, et al., 2021). The differences between kinds of atheists, agnostics, and the growing number of “spiritual but not religious” people are critical for your clients, even if they are less familiar to you. Understanding the contours of this changing set of terms can help you better meet the needs of your clients.

Religious and spiritual issues do not have to be a client’s presenting concern to be an important part of their therapeutic process. They rarely are. Often, spiritual themes emerge when clients are experiencing suffering, facing existential anxiety, grieving, or struggling to make sense of an unfair or unjust world (Van Tongeren & Showalter Van Tongeren, 2020). Religious and spiritual struggles may be common when clients experience life transitions or are working on aspects of their identity. People may question their beliefs or doubt their assumptions about the way the world (and perhaps God) works when feeling meaningless, hopeless, or stuck.

Whether religion occupies a central part of your identity or you consider yourself spiritual, or whether spiritual or religious issues have previously been pervasive in your clinical practice, we think this book will bring value to your clinical work. Your own religious and spiritual journey and worldview will play a role in how you engage with your client (Oxhandler, 2017, 2022), particularly around these core issues of religious and spiritual change. Put simply, we think every therapist and helping professional can benefit from this book: social workers, mental health counselors, pastoral counselors. In addition, we sought to write this book to benefit clinical researchers, social scientists, and those working in various roles in diverse religious and spiritual communities. A growing number of people are experiencing various kinds of religious and spiritual change and no longer affiliate with organized religion (Hackett et al., 2025). Previously, your clients may have sought out a spiritual leader for guidance;

now, they turn to therapy for insights into their situation. And as they do, more of religious or spiritual themes may make their way into the clinical conversations and deep psychological work necessary to facilitate a flourishing life. Amid a sea of spiritual change, your clients will seek a harbor where they can discuss their existential concerns and ultimate questions. They will seek help in the midst of this Existential Unsettling. This book will help prepare you for that good and important work.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book is organized around making empirically validated psychological science clinically relevant. Our goal is to translate cutting-edge research into practical ways of working with your clients. We adopt a theoretical framework oriented around an existential perspective. We discuss how your clients engage deep existential questions as a result of their religious and spiritual changes, and how your own engagement around, and comfort with, existential issues plays a role in your therapeutic work. Still, when making recommendations, we operate from the assumption that you are following typical best practices in clinical work: developing a strong therapeutic alliance, building rapport, engaging in active and reflective listening, using the client's preferred terminologies, attending to cultural sensitivities, validating the dignity and worth of a client, and upholding professional ethics. These are standard guidelines to orient your work. So we won't mention the very basic skills we assume you are practicing. Our guidance and the suggestions in this book are additional ways to engage with your clients. They are add-ons or supplemental considerations. They are not meant to replace the good work you are doing but could be considered ways to expand your work with clients who are undergoing religious and spiritual change.

Finally, we understand and appreciate the diversity of religious and spiritual backgrounds your clients may come from and identities toward which they may be heading. Although we sought to offer examples from a range of faith traditions, many of the illustrations draw from Western Christianity, given its historical predominance in the United States and because this is the group that is experiencing the greatest degree of religious change (Lesage et al., 2025). Nonetheless, we draw from cross-cultural research involving myriad religious affiliations that demonstrate distinct expressions yet common themes. Thus, we anticipate that many of the concepts explored in this book, and the strategies recommended, can be thoughtfully applied to various faiths and religious changes with careful cultural consideration.

In Chapter 1, we frame religion and spirituality from an existential perspective. Specifically, we discuss that religion is an existential resource that addresses important core questions in life and how religious and spiritual change may elicit existential anxiety. In Chapter 2, we discuss four kinds of religious change: religious deconstruction, religious reconstruction, religious deidentification, and seeking nonreligious spirituality. We discuss the nature and consequences of these changes and offer recommendations to engage clients in these processes.

In Chapter 3, we introduce the centerpiece of our approach: the existential distress, growth, and engagement (EDGE) model of religious and spiritual change. Specifically, we posit that to reduce defensiveness and move clients toward growth, clinicians must help people develop an existential distress tolerance to manage the potential anxiety that accompanies religious and spiritual change. In Chapter 4, we frame diverse spiritual care as a cultural competency. Namely, we discuss how clinicians can enhance their existential awareness and cultivate cultural humility to better serve those seeking their care.

In Chapter 5, we explain how clients confront the existential chasm, which is the discrepancy between the existential security their previous beliefs and practices offered them and their current degree of existential comfort in the wake of ultimate reminders. We offer recommendations for how clients can authentically engage with their new life after religious and spiritual change. In Chapter 6, we discuss how clients may face the five existential concerns after having undergone a significant change in their religious and spiritual worldview. For each concern, we offer a definition, describe clinical manifestations of the concern, and offer therapeutic recommendations.

In Chapter 7, we explore how your clients' changes alter their sense of self and identity across a variety of domains. We also highlight potential landing spots for your clients after undergoing change. Finally, in Chapter 8, we discuss how religious and spiritual change affects your clients' relationships, from partners to parenting to friends to family. We conceptualize this as the process of navigating two cultures, with the end goal of helping your clients move toward existential integration.

To help set the stage, let's start by discussing the theoretical and clinical foundations that frame this approach before highlighting some key clinical strategies.