# THE INTER-DISCIPLINARY NATURE OF SPIRITUAL/RELIGIOUS COUNSELLING IN THE CYBERNETIC/MEDIA OR CYBERSPACE FIELD

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## Abstract

The article develops the notion of counselling within the cybernetic-cyberspace or media areas, integrating areas of spirituality and religious thought with social work, Psychology, education, Psychiatry and Law. With the help of carefully chosen methodological instruments, our research has shown the necessity of understanding the religious healing process in the context of and in reference to the main trends in social and medical disciplines. To document this, examples of concrete individuals with an emphasis on a longitudinal approach was used combining quantitative and qualitative methods of research. The aim of this study is: (1) to identify the degree to which we require an interdisciplinary approach in Internet counselling with spiritual and religious aspects and (2) to identify the basic contents and thematic areas in counselling corresponding to these aspects.

*Keywords:* religious healing, counselling, cybernetic field, client, media

## 1. Introduction

In one way or another, what one may call spiritual or religious counselling was present throughout human history. Religious counselling is also part of general communication as such, since counselling, regardless of whether it is understood as a one-way process or two-way process, involves reception and interaction. In this sense, it could be viewed within the confines of the general definition of cybernetics if cybernetics is viewed as a communicative system in its own right regardless of its diverse varieties of scope. It is important to mention that one does not need to be religious to be spiritual if spirituality is understood as involving any means possible, which would bring out the 'inner value systems or not, we can consciousness' involved in the healing process. Here we may also stress the important observation of the scholar Vaclav Jezek who asserts that spirituality (religious and non-religious) has 'indeterminacy' as

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its underlining feature [V. Ježek, Lectures given at the University of Presov, Slovakia, on June 2, 2019]. 'Indeterminacy' in the sense that whether we subscribe to religious values and still be spiritual in the broader sense of the term if we understand spirituality as something innate, unpredictable and indefinable, but still as an integral part of the human psychological makeup and happiness [1].

Spirituality can be 'indeterminate' because it is not necessarily linked to a particular religious institution. Whether one must be affiliated with a particular religious tradition to be spiritual is debatable. Traditional religious establishments tend to question the validity of such spirituality. Recently this has culminated in the discussion of whether one can employ Yoga techniques in therapy without being religious [2].

Our deliberations on the ambiguous relationship between spirituality and religiosity can further be supplemented by exploring the importance of mysticism understood as an element of spirituality and its more or less 'independent' nature from conventional traditional institutional religions. For a general value of mysticism, see the classical studies of, for example, Friedrich von Hugel [3] or Underhill [4]. Mysticism could here be understood as a kind of inner psychosomatic consciousness, which is difficult to define but still reaches the depths of the human mind and knowledge offering it an important role in any form of therapy.

Regardless of one's attitude towards spirituality and religious therapy, these could be viewed as standard procedures, especially due to the fact that the goal of these therapeutic disciplines is a return to a healthy situation both physically and mentally. In this regard, one may agree with Vaclav Jezek, who believes that spirituality is not an intrusive discipline because its goal is universal; that is, the therapeutic return to a 'healthy' state [V. Ježek, Lectures given at the University of Presov, Slovakia, on June 2, 2019]. It is a return and affirmation of one's goal. Similarly, the founder of Psycho-Cybernetics writes: "Great living starts with a picture, held in your imagination, of what you like to do or be" [5]. Therapy here would pertain to health in all its aspects. This notion could further be supported by the ideas of Mircea Elliade as expressed in his work *The Myth of the Eternal Return* [6].

The difference between the spiritual counselor and psychotherapist lies mainly in that the former utilizes the patient's or client's spirituality, or spiritual disposition, in order to draw positive healing outcomes. To this degree, the given person does not have to be a believer of any sort [7]. Scott Richards reminds us that due to various reasons, a certain antagonism existed between the behavioural sciences and religion to the detriment of the individuals in need [7, p. 22-24].

The distance between psychotherapy and spiritual counselling is being overcome by developments in clinical practice. "The boundary between religious/spiritual organizations and the more 'secular' self-help and 'positive thinking' movements is quite fuzzy, in terms of both the kinds of adherent whom they attract and the philosophies and techniques they teach." [8] Spirituality as

consumerism understood in terms of ready remedies is a new and increasing phenomenon. Paradoxically, spirituality can offer a consumerist non-spiritual treatment, often implying in some cases, advancement in monetary and financial success.

The current research increasingly recognizes the importance of a broader platform for psychology itself, which has issues of its own as a discipline. Bakan noted that psychology has lost its meaning today, partly because it concentrates on fixing problems rather than also promoting development, enlightenment, and growth, elements that can be associated with spiritual or religious growth [9]. Here we can offer some methodological prerequisites related to therapeutic methods involving religious values and systems. In a sense, this draws on what was said earlier in terms of exploring the dynamics and relations of spirituality *vis a vis* forms of religious expression.

Religious systems and value systems can become a platform for manipulative behaviour. A religious system can become a certain prison, from which there is no escape. This could be linked to a prominent religious figure, who exercises power towards a certain individual or individuals. The therapist here can offer a tentative way out of a manipulative process and must avoid the possibility or tendency towards manipulating the client in one form or another in terms of any therapeutic process at hand. A possible temptation here, present throughout the history of counselling, is that the counsellor himself uses manipulative techniques, though not with the intention of harming the client but facilitating or enhancing the therapeutic process. However, in the long run, as studies and experience show, such methods and behaviour could do more harm than good.

It is important to realize that the subject, for obvious reasons, does not necessarily realize that he or she is religiously manipulated. The manipulated individual 'needs to be told' that he or she is in this situation, which is, of course, part of the healing and therapeutic process itself. A manipulative situation could be revealed by people related to the manipulated person, by his or her relatives who are concerned that there is a malicious process going on. The therapist can and should rely on the witness testimony of others involved, which could help the overall therapeutic environment.

In addition, all forms of religiosity involve an important concept, which we can label here as conversion. Conversion, broadly understood, involves an important turn in the individual from one specific point to another. Conversion, either as a psychological or spiritual process, is always a dramatic experience permeating to the inner levels of the human being. We must clearly state here that conversion does not mean merely a conversion to a religious belief but could imply any form of conversion even to non-religious belief. A conversion is an intensive process that has serious effects on the psychosomatic well-being of the individual. The therapist could bring in here his or her expertise in helping the individual to understand what conversion is and what its effects can be.

Every religious system, or even a vaguely defined spirituality, offers psychosomatic imagery, which is the goal or attraction of religion as such. Analysing the religious imagery and influences of this imagery on the client is an important aspect of the therapeutic process. The issue here is how one can discern the 'intensity' and meaning of this religious imagery for the particular individual. The therapist has to offer the individual a prism or vantage point to 'correctly' identify the imagery and its role in the life and well-being of the individual experiencing them. Arriving at this prism is not an easy process either for the individual or the therapist. A multidisciplinary approach is obviously needed here.

In any case, we can agree with Schreurs that spirituality of the client is important for the counsellor/psychotherapist, regardless of whether he or she is a believer or not because spirituality always entails inter-personal relationships, thus influencing the healing process of the individual. As she suggests, a psychotherapist cannot simply throw away what we may call 'spiritual categories' [10].

Religious experiences have ambiguous effects and could bring about serious moments of crisis. This has been recognized for some time and has been addressed on the institutional level in many forms, such as the so-called Spiritual Emergency Network - SEN, which was established in 1980 by Christine Grof [11]. Dealing with this form of crisis is a difficult task again, involving many professional fields dealing with human behaviour. In any event, a deepening religious crisis could involve the destruction of the human being in the sense of a loss of orientation and identity but also a loss of consciousness and self-awareness in the broader sense.

We have indicated the importance of understanding institutional religiosity. One of the important aspects of religious life is the interaction of the individual with the institutional framework of religion [12]. This aspect has not been explored in the history of religion but also other related disciplines. All the more important is the interaction of the individual with the institution if there is an inner tension between the two. The relationship between the individual and the religious institution is a relationship that could offer a variety of results. Generally said, this relationship is uneven and unequal. The individual can find himself facing pressure from a religious institution. Of course, there are cases of individuals dominating a religious institution. Still, we are speaking here mainly in the context of individuals who are not governing or directing religious institutions but are its members. Work and life inside a religious institution can result in other issues involving what may be called as a 'religious burnout'. This could be a condition of the individual no longer having the ability to form a meaningful and mutually beneficial relationship with a particular religious institution. In any event, problems and issues involving the religious institution could result in a situation where the individual loses his or her 'faith' either in the institution itself or its ability to convey 'truth' or even in truth itself as it is presented or not presented by the institution.

Diversity in religious culture could present serious challenges. In our current globalized world, with the migration crisis looming, religious and intercultural interaction are a serious issue. For many immigrants, "religiosity continues to serve primarily as a 'buffer', i.e. a protective cushion to mitigate the effects of social exclusion, discrimination, and overall cultural alienation" [13, p. 52]. Little has been done in terms of scholarly studies assessing the impact of intercultural and inter-religious interaction, especially in the context of the new situation facing the world with the movements of peoples. On the other hand, interaction with other values can be beneficial [14]. For example, rediscovering African perspectives on human relationships, which see these relationships not so much in terms of a European dualist 'me and the other' terms, but more in terms of integration and unity, can be useful. Thus, the African assumption is related to the Nguni proverb that "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" ('a person is a person through other persons') [15, p. 61].

In terms of the individual as such, it is evident that there are multiple life events, which could have some relationship with religion or spirituality, as we implied above. The role of the therapist is not to initiate religious connotations in the client or individual, but his or her role is to facilitate a possible religious event. Here the counsellor/therapist must realize that for the client, his or her religiosity is part of the healing process and should be able to draw on this process in a positive and facilitative manner.

Related to this aspect is the necessity of properly analysing the potential religious or spiritual needs of the client. This implies the necessity of understanding the religious values involved, correctly understanding not their inherent truth or value but the role they play in the client's subjective and objective wellbeing. From the vantage point of the client or the therapist-counsellor, religion/spirituality are important for the healing process to the extent to which they play a positive or negative role in this healing process. The role of the counsellor is not to assess this role but to utilize its positive dynamics within this process.

## 2. Internet counselling - a case study

There is an on-going discussion on the benefits of various forms of internet counselling. The onset of new technologies offers new possibilities for counselling, especially in those cases where internet counselling is perhaps the only form of available communication and counselling for certain individuals and cases. Internet counselling can be, of course, combined with other forms of cognitive-behavioural therapy. Cognitive-behavioural therapy is also an important field related in many forms to religious systems of therapy. Teater defines it in the following way: "Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a method that aims to reduce psychological distress and dysfunction by exploring and addressing how the integration of services users' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are contributing to the presenting problem. Three assumptions form the foundation of CBT: (1) Thinking (cognition) mediates emotions and

behaviours (2) Faulty cognitions lead to psychological distress and dysfunction; (3) Psychological distress and dysfunction are reduced or alleviated through modifications in the faulty cognitions and behaviours." [16]

Internet counselling/therapy involves such communication, which entails any form utilizing internet technologies - e-mail, chats, video conferences, and other forms, instant messaging, forums, social networking, and other forms. Online therapy is the on-going and interactive communication between a client and mental health professional via e-mail, chat rooms, or interactive video [17]. Generally stated, there is widespread agreement among scholars that online therapy is a useful tool in different forms of therapy. Psychotherapeutic services delivered via the Internet are a useful supplement to face-to-face therapeutic care [18, 19]. The study of Wagner, Horn and Maercker, comparing online and face-to-face therapy in the context of treating depression within the framework of cognitive-behavioural therapy, had even shown that the online method was just as effective, if not more than the face to face option [19]. A new avenue of interaction is also offered by hypermedia, involving multiple users who can join in a discussion online [18].

The Internet offers a new form of interaction between the counsellor and the client. There are wide-ranging opinions on the subject of how exactly the Internet changes the dynamics of human interaction. Some scholars argue that the Internet enables a more sincere expression of emotions, and the discussion could be more open [20, 21]. Ideally, the client in such a situation can loosen his or her own limitations and concentrate on the "core of the problem" [22]. Studies suggest other advantages brought about by internet communication. These include a greater possibility of focusing on a topic, the client cannot as quickly avoid the core issues, and the client has to focus on his or her problems and not as is often the case in a face to face counselling, avoid the issues by a flow of verbal images and expressions [23]. In any case, the possibilities of online counselling and its benefits still need to be confirmed by further studies [24].

When it comes to religious elements, it is also true that other challenges could play a role in online counselling, including those that could also be problematic in general counselling. One such example is *projection* - a situation when the client idealizes the counsellor or therapist in one way or another. There are many issues linked to internet counselling, which could be a challenge in the future. Some of these are related to legal issues, technical aspects, and so on. From a purely religious point of view, one must assess the dynamics of interaction in an environment that does not allow for the immediacy of personal physical interaction, which may "decrease human capacity for empathy, causing human relationships to be shallow and unstable" [25, p. 181]. The physicality of personal interaction is a key component in religious contexts. Regardless of its theistic connotations, physical contact and interaction are undoubtedly an important factor for the success of any therapeutic activity. Of course, given the contemporary issues linked with the coronavirus, internet interaction and

counselling has become an important area, which has received further prominence.

## 3. The goals of the present project

The project seeks to assess the possibilities inherent in an interdisciplinary approach in relation to internet-based counselling. This interdisciplinary approach would entail, including counselling with a spiritual and religious basis. Of course, the obvious question that emerges is whether there is a method of understanding the exact role of religion or spirituality in internet counselling and its qualitative difference from other forms of counselling. We have addressed this problem by stipulating a system of categories, which would enable a more effective assessment of this issue.

Thus, we have to identify the role of religious-spiritual counselling within the confines of interdisciplinary approaches to counselling. The other important task linked with this goal is to identify the value and approaches of religious/spiritual counselling by categorizing its contents in relation to the various components of other forms of counselling.

The present research project was carried on in the context of quantitative strategies but has not been taken forward into a verifiable, comparative, or correlative research form of research. Its character is taken into an exploratory or descriptive framework, which is characterized by the non-postulation of a hypothesis, but which follows one primary variable [26-28].

### 3.1. Research method

In order to create categories, we have utilized a system of analytical classification, which enabled us to divide sets of elements until equal elements were reached. The categories were then subjected to a relational analysis, which revealed the researched model of functional relationships - the need for an interdisciplinary approach on three scales: small, medium and large [29]. The categories corresponded with the rules of research relating to this particular social theme [30]. The data was analysed through designated categories, which we have achieved by content analysis that created numerical nominal markers based on a qualitative research mode. We focused on the contextual elements related to themes and currents [31]. The unit of the addition was defined within the confines of the frequency of the occurring marker [32].

For the statistical testing, we have utilized the test of positive congruence $\chi^2$ and the test of independence $\chi^2$ for the contingent table. For the final analysis of the categorization results and the expression of the probability result, we have utilized the calculation of the interval of reliability for the relative frequency of the alternate marker. If the level of importance - p value (Sig.) of the used tests was smaller than 0.05, we accepted the alternate hypothesis. For the degree of divergence between the real and expected amounts (as well as for the direction), the z-core (criterion $z$) was utilized as an expression. The significant difference

was acknowledged if the value of the criterion *z* was larger than 1.96 or smaller than 1.96.

### 3.2. The quality of the entrance data

The basic element of the realized research was the expression of interest for the counselling contact (that is, the initiation of the counselling relationship, which was defined as an independent thematic and expressive unit - question, demand, and question-issue), which was published on an internet portal with the offer of spiritual-religious advice in the form of spiritual counselling, pastoral counselling and so on. The respondents can be called clients or individuals for our purposes.

Criteria for the selection of internet portals:
1. Spiritually and religiously orientated counselling.
2. The answers were provided by specialists in the fields of Theology, Religious studies, Psychology, psychotherapy, Social work, education, Medicine and Law. Those interested in receiving a religious counselling contact knew about this professional setting. The portal had a publicly accessible database.

In total, we gathered 1032 initiations or expressions of interest related to contact in relation to religious or spiritual issues, with a related text of 387 pages of data. Given this amount of data, we considered the research sufficiently grounded by data to fulfil its goals. The quality of the entrance data is the most important moment in our quantitative and qualitative orientated research. For our purposes, it was important that we could not in any way influence its original character - that is, it was not influenced in any way by interaction with the research process. Further, it offers more possibilities for analytic comparison. The quality of the final data stresses the fact that it was also used as the underlining data for partial studies of similarly orientated research projects. A good example is the research of Zdenek Vojtíšek from the Charles University [33], who is considered a leading figure of the non-confessionally orientated spiritual counselling, and who continually points to the necessity of showing respect towards spiritually and religiously orientated rules in the assisting professions.

### 3.3. The problem of categorizing and codification

We based our categories on the platforms of realized research projects. We initiated our process from published information, which identified a 'one-third model' of orientation towards contact with spiritual/religious dimensions. This model identifies three categories: 1) informative, 2) confessional counselling, in which the client for some reason did not want to seek help within his or her own spiritual tradition, and 3) situations which, according to psychological or psychotherapeutically orientated advice, would demand a more complex psychological therapeutic approach [33]. These empirical-theoretical reflections also display a decrease in the demand for purely informative forms of

counselling, which led us to identify given categories and the functional relationship.

As we have already indicated above, the functional relationship in the revealed process of the relational analysis shows the necessity for interdisciplinary approaches in counselling areas with spiritual and religious contexts. It is very difficult (if not impossible) in this case to identify the moment in which the competence of various specializations converge. We thus decided to identify sub-categories that provide us with an overall picture of the analysed phenomenon. The sub-category B provides us with the borderline category and contains moments which are characteristic for the original and the next category. We have determined the following categories and sub-categories.

- Category number 1: informative-consultancy areas of internet counselling with religious and spiritual elements:
    sub-category 1A: demand for overall spiritual and religious information,
    sub-category 1B: outward expressions,
    the degree of interdisciplinary approaches: MINOR.
- Category number 2: intimate spiritual-moral dilemmas:
    sub-category 2A: dilemmas of moral consciousness and proper conduct,
    sub-category 2B: life with a partner and sexuality,
    the degree of interdisciplinary approaches: MEDIUM.
- Category number 3: crisis with a spiritual dimension:
    sub-category 3A: existential frustration,
    sub-category 3B: possible psychiatric indications.

### 3.4. Results, interpretations and recommendations of the conducted research

The results were described according to the form and goals of the research project. In congruence with the combined-synthetic, quantitative-qualitative paradigm of research we not only describe statistical results, but we illustrate the entire presentation with the representative examples of the entrance data or the delineated excerpts [34]. The described examples of the desired counselling contact with spiritual-religious dimensions are formulated according to linguistic structures (grammar, stylistics) without alternation in their content structures.

### 3.4.1. The summary of the categories' results - identifying the degree of the interdisciplinary approach in internet counselling

Needless to say, the interdisciplinary approach which is governing our research aims and goals is linked to the overall role of interdisciplinarity as being recognized in Science and the Humanities [35]. In our research project, we have identified the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches in three functional relations of the identified categories: 1) Minor, 2) Medium and 3) Major. In case of the minor necessity for interdisciplinary approaches (category number 1), we argue that we have not identified a more serious variability and complexity of the presented problem in the researched counselling initiation or case. In this

sense, it is sufficient in such cases that the counsellor should provide only basic information, distributive measures, and the space for self-expression. We did not research the inherent pathology, which could possibly appear in some cases of individual counselling.
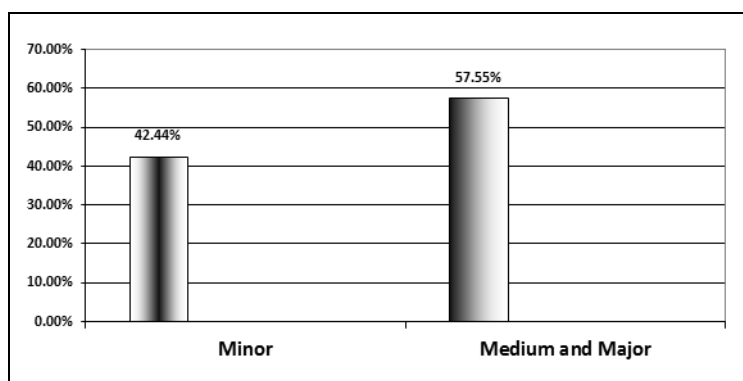
In the case of medium or major need for interdisciplinary approaches (categories number 2 and categories number 3), we have expressed the need for a more complex structural approach to the problem, which requires intervention, integrated knowledge of other disciplines, and the sensitivity to the needs of the client. Table 1 presents the results of the summarization.

**Table 1.** Summary results of the categorization (n = 1032, p < 0.001, $\chi^2$ = 226.89).

| Category number 1 | 42.44 % |
|---|---|
| Category number 2 | 46.22 % |
| Category number 3 | 11.33 % |

The equilibrium one-third model in internet counselling with spiritual and religious elements cannot be presented. On the basis of a calculation of the interval for reliability for the relative frequency of the alternate sign, we can argue that internet counselling with spiritual/religious elements in 95% cases is orientated towards the category 1 in the range from 39.4% to 45.4%; into the category number 2 in the range from 43.2% to 49.2%; and into the category 3 from 9.37% to 13.2%.

A more complex picture showing the need for an interdisciplinary approach will be gained by merging categories, during which this requirement was defined (Figure 1). We can affirm a high degree of counselling initiations in category number 1. Counselling portals, which have fulfilled our criteria, were designated as critical. Some were focused on the 'confidential phone lines', which have moved them onto the level of methodologically related counselling in social work.



n = 1032, p < 0.01, $\chi^2$ = 23.58

**Figure 1.** A depiction of the interdisciplinary approach in counselling with spiritual-religious elements.

Counselling in the areas of spirituality and religiosity is in its contents, structure, and method the most proximate to social work. This fact is enhanced by a different range and individual character of the client's needs. That is why it is necessary that counselling (with spiritual and religious dimensions) would reflect an interdisciplinary approach and would utilize individual techniques. It is also important to address the need for the epistemological basis of the apparently unrelated sciences. A deeper view of the identifiable sub-categories will enhance the role of this statement.

### 3.5. Consultative and informative areas of internet counselling

Counselling in the areas of spirituality and religiosity, just as other forms of counselling, has different forms. These are classified according to forms of intervention, and as we have shown, also by the level of interdisciplinary approaches. The ideal environment for its informative dimensions is exactly the analysed internet form, which is suitable for one-off contact. On the other hand, our research, together with other conducted studies [36], have shown that this form of communication is being sought by clients whose problems would be better solved by personal encounters and often on a long-term basis.

In the context of the first identified category, we have discovered a qualitatively different motive, which we have noticed in people who use this as a basis for ventilating their frustrations. These might be people who do not live in a spiritual context but do think about religious and spiritual issues, and who feel a lack of other possibilities in how to share their feelings and approaches [36]. We must point out that even a remotely negative stance towards faith is still deserving of the professional counsellor's attention, and even a subtle interest in speaking with a counsellor can conceal a hidden form of pathology.

**Table 2.** Results of the categorization of the informative consultative areas of internet counselling with spiritual and religious dimensions.

| Applications for general information about religious and spiritual elements | 84.93% |
|---|---|
| Forms of expression of venting | 15.06% |

n = 438, p < 0.001, $\chi^2$ = 213.78

The first category presumes an informative, distributive (i.e. when the client himself expressed an interest to turn to a specialist, or perhaps an institution, which would help to deal with his problem), and venting or expressive action (Table 2). There was an expressed need in our case by 84.93% of cases, and in 15.06% cases, there were issues of what may be called the need to ventilate. Here information was part of elementary counselling. Just as is the case with social counselling, so in the case of counselling with spiritual and religious dimensions, the need for information is very strong. As Gabura shows the clients often lack information, which would help them orient themselves in the areas under discussion [37]. On the other hand, the counsellor must not

overwhelm the client with too much information. Instead, one should choose that information, which helps in the client's everyday solutions.

A special group of questions in this category are questions about lesser traditional forms of religious expression. Even if we are not speaking of religious groups that display remnants of socio-pathological manipulation, there is a risk of forms of religious contact, which would be of a negative and pathological nature. The counsellor should discern the dangers and possibly offer ways of preventing possible damage. As soon as it is possible to discern any forms of socio-pathological elements in religious contexts, this means that we are dealing with an area with a high level of interdisciplinary co-operation - category number 3.

Counselling with a religious and spiritual dimension is most often focused on organizational, phenomenological-confessional, historiographical, and distributive levels of spiritual traditions, which are linked with the areas of Europe. In the example below, an individual expressed the need for more information about the conditions for a possible wedding in a Roman Catholic Church.

*"Good day! ~ I have a couple of questions regarding the possibility of having a wedding in a Roman Catholic Church ~ 1. Is it possible to have a wedding in a catholic church between a Roman Catholic believer and an unbeliever who is divorced (wedding registered on the state level, both not baptized)? He is interested in faith and is preparing to be baptized. If yes, what are the conditions? 2. Is it possible to have a wedding in a catholic church of a catholic and a divorced person who is baptized, for example, in the Czecho-Slovak Hussite church (wedding registered on the state level, both unbaptized). If yes, what are the conditions? Thank you in advance for your reply."* (Source: own research)

Counselling entails more complex processes than mere handing out information. It offers the client knowledge and education, which have a broader range and deeper implications. In this case, we should not forget that we are still not speaking of advice as such. Questions asked by a professional with the intention of gaining information about spiritual or religious techniques, which can influence the execution of professional activities, belong to this category. In our research, we have noted requests for religious/spiritual counselling related to professional activities, which have been offered by specialists in assisting professions as social work, psychology, education and general care.

*"Good day, / I am a teacher of English/ where we also learn about American history and habits. At the end of October last year, we have been taught about Halloween. Children have learned a couple of poems and other songs related to this theme. They wanted to show their achievements to their parents so that on the 31 of October, we have organized Halloween. Children during the evening were visiting the parents of their classmates and sang carols and songs. They were looking forward to this event, as I was and still remember it. The children were brilliant, so were the parents, who photographed all and witnessed to all. I was disappointed, however, to encounter an opinion that*

*celebrating Halloween is a sin. Perhaps it is a Celtic celebration, but I have read in the encyclopaedia that it perhaps has some relation with the Christian feast of All Saints. I would like to know: is the celebration of Halloween a sin, or even a serious sin? Thank you very much for your reply."* (Source: entry data)

Venting one's emotions helps one to release his or her emotional tension, which maintains the person in a state of tension. For example, the clients do not have anybody in their surroundings with which they can release their religious or spiritual tension. Sometimes we are speaking of a state when people are flooding their surroundings with problems and complaints to such a degree that it can no longer function as an area of venting. Both groups of people are usually happy with the results. In the moment of ventilation, we approach the area of social counselling, which does not just work with frequently supplying information, but also presents degrees of interdisciplinary intervention.

In the case of counselling with spiritual and religious dimensions, there could be cases of rebellion or repulsion towards this counselling, which is paradoxical. In such cases, we cannot allow ourselves to be carried away into subjectivity. It is a challenge to go further into the deeper issues at hand. In the Orthodox Christian tradition, there is the notion of *diakrisis*, which basically means the ability on the part of the counsellor to identify the deeper dimensions and problems. We might consider this a kind of 'prophetic revelation' similar to Christian terms linked with edification and exhortation, similar to the Pauline usage (1 Corinthians 12.10; cf. 14.29), (*Diakrisis pneumaton*). Or a 'Revelation' to see the deeper meaning and issues at hand.

It is necessary to state that the counsellor in cases where there is a negative response from the individual being counselled, has to be aware of the dangers and possibilities of continuing with his or her counselling and the necessity of changing tactics and methods. It presumes a kind of self-less approach.

*"Good day! - I doubt that God exists. - There is no proof of the existence of God…If a God did indeed exist, he is surely a coward. I think it is just an imaginative figure for those who are in some sort of need. - Lately, everything is falling on my head - and I look at people who, in such situations, turn to God. I do not want to laugh because I want to be polite. I work now for some time for the fire department. Believe me, that in some cases, even I do not have the stomach for what I see. So I cannot understand why someone should argue that God exists… perhaps Satan, this one yes, but even this can be not true…We can perhaps believe only in evil, which is everywhere. Someone does not give way to someone on the road, and we have accidents….The human being works as crazy, and how is he rewarded? In no way….I will not delay you anymore."* (Source: own data)

### 3.6. Moral dilemmas and intimate spiritual issues

For the individual moral dilemmas are crucial issues. Moral dilemmas of course, can provoke tension, and this tension seems to appear due to the need to

decide between evil and good. Both options have their own challenges. For example, what appears to be the solution in the short term can be destructive in the long term and vice versa. The solution can correspond to some kind of principle to which the human being subscribes. In our case, the issue deals with the interiorization of spiritual and religious discernment and its consequences. For individuals, a dilemma is something that necessitates a decision and action. Once one decides, it is no longer a dilemma.

Dilemmas involving spiritual and moral issues in the range between 43.2% and 49.2 % were the core of expressed needs for counselling. In relation to the sub-category of the dilemmas related to moral discernment and proper conduct, we have associated these with category number 2, with the preference of 71.06% (Table 3). The sub-category of spiritual-moral dilemmas that are aimed at partnerships and sexuality was represented by 28.93%.

**Table 3.** Results of categories of intimate/spiritual and moral dilemmas in the areas of internet counselling with spiritual and religious dimensions.

| Dilemmas of moral conduct and proper decision making | 71.06% |
|---|---|
| Sexuality and partner life | 28.93% |

$n = 477, p < 0.001, \chi^2 = 84.68$

In relation to moral decisions and proper conduct, a strong role in the analysed context is occupied by religiously sanctioned moral rules which have relation to the activities of the human person and his or her inter/personal relationships. The role of applied sciences is also related here to the establishment of moral rules in a particular social setting. We can also establish a relationship between morality and common sense.

We can express moral behaviour in two ways. In one aspect, moral behaviour can be something that is considered to be in line with the convictions of the human being. In the other aspect, it can be defined as moral in relation to the accepted moral standards. In relation to dilemmas of moral discernment and proper conduct in cases related to religious or spiritual issues, these can occur if the individual cannot discover an acceptable option - in the situation in which there is no option for the possibility of accepting external moral standards. These kinds of states provoke an accumulation of tension, which can create long term psychosomatic problems.

*"Good day! - For some time now, I have a problem with one of the Biblical passages, which states that one should love one's neighbour, / I have the following problem - I hate my mother and her friend - I desire to live a clean life without alcohol, cigarettes and especially in faith in God. For some years now, my mother is drinking alcohol, sometimes less, sometimes more. I discussed the issue with her, but after that, the situation did not improve or better still got worse. I learned how not to communicate since I never know if she is speaking with me or her alter ego - alcohol. I then take the Bible in my hand and read in it: Love your neighbour...how can you love the Lord God, whom you cannot see if you do not love your neighbour who you see...How can*

*i love, when again and again, I am hurt? Where can I find the strength? I am not a saint....I have the feeling that I am alone, that I am abandoned, and that God has turned away from me. That my heart has turned to stone, and I am not capable of no feeling, and of course, not even compassion and love....(...)"* (Source: entry data)

An important element in moral discernment and proper conduct is the issue of forgiveness. The role of forgiveness in psychological well-being is being explored intensively in our period, and the positive role of forgiveness is confirmed [38]. Of course, as has been noted often, forgiveness is not merely moving on, but entails compassion, empathy, and so on [39]. In the first instance, it is necessary to realize that if we are to understand this area properly, we cannot do so through the lens of social satisfaction. This here is a secondary element in the overall counselling process whose goal is the object itself. Here is Kant's conception "*that the autonomy of the will is the character of will, thanks to which the will itself is its own law*" [40]. The fact remains that in the perspective of spiritual and religious counselling, guilt has its own dimensions. As is well known in psychological circles, the lack of guilt is considered as evidence of psychopathological tendencies. In some ways, guilt can be a motivation for seeking counselling. Especially in terms of religiosity, guilt can be a problem. The counsellor must discern the exact position of guilt in the individual's mind and its overall role.

The issue of guilt and remorse is of paramount importance for our own purposes, since it is a very important feature. Of course, what needs to be stated is that guilt and remorse are also linked to self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is one of the aims of counselling in. In psychology, self-knowledge can be linked with mental health, whereas in the religious sphere with "spiritual growth" [41].

*"Unfortunately, I have done a lot of bad things in the past, for which I am embarrassed. By my inadequate behaviour, I have injured people, and - it hurts me a lot - I cannot apologize to some people personally, but I am apologizing in my mind and asking for forgiveness. I would like to ask if it is possible that I will be forgiven, is there a possibility of my salvation even against these evil acts of mine, and also because I am also not baptized. I read that God will save those who are baptized…"* (Source: entry data)

In this example above, there is a two-way process of clarification. The counsellor has to clarify for himself or herself the issues at hand, just as the individual being counselled must understand and clarify the problems and issues involved. Clarification is a psychodynamic event [42]. In the above example, we can even argue that the involvement of guilt expressed by the individual is already a form of therapy, or at least the initiation of therapy. Acknowledgment of guilt is already a form of therapy, which could be coupled with shame. Acknowledging guilt is a way of diffusing aggression and anger [43].

### *3.7. Crisis and spiritual crisis*

A crisis can be understood as a situation in which the individual cannot maintain a balance any longer and cannot with his or her own resources overcome the crisis. A crisis can also mean a radical and dramatic change in one's life [44]. In such a situation, the internal difficulties can be multiplied to such a degree that there is a change in behaviour, cognitive, emotional and behavioural disorganization, which can lead to psychological burn out [45]. Or: "... crisis is a perception or experience of an event or situation as an intolerable difficulty that exceeds the person's current resources and coping mechanisms" [46]. Caplan observes: "People are in a state of crisis when they face an obstacle to important life goals, - and obstacle, that is, for a time, insurmountable by the use of customary methods of problem-solving" [47].

A crisis can mean radical fear, which in some cases can result in death. Here we are using a general designation of crisis, but of course, there are various forms of crisis, such as emotional crisis, developmental crisis, situational crisis, existential crisis, and so on. In any case, we need to emphasize here that in the literature itself, there are no clear definitions of crisis or emergency for that matter [48].

A crisis, if professionally managed, can lead to healing. This is actually a remarkably interesting feature of the Chinese word for *crisis*, which is formed by characters meaning *danger and opportunity*. Here the counsellor, who addresses critical points in the life of the individual, can contribute to the healing process. Each stage in the development of the human being, even if it brings critical issues, can bring healing, coupled with growth. Here what is important to note is that the counsellor is not necessarily supposed to offer growth in the sense of positive development but at least some healing of the on-going crisis. If the crisis indeed leads not only to healing but also to growth, this is another successful aspect of the process. In the context of religion and spirituality, a crisis can be an opportunity for growth [49].

However, it needs to be pointed out from the outset that a crisis does not immediately appear as an opportunity for growth for the individual undergoing the crisis. The important aspect of the crisis is precisely the fact that the one experiencing the crisis is not aware of its potential to heal or grow. The crisis 'prevents the vision of growth and healing' in the individual. Here emotion or feeling is important. A crisis is accompanied by emotional tension. The counsellor, if he is to be successful, cannot destroy the ability to feel emotion, but on the contrary, redirect it [50]. A large problem that was traditionally present, especially in religious and spiritual counselling, was the tendency to abolish emotionality as such, which was falsely associated with negative passion.

In our research, a crisis with spiritual elements had appeared in the range between 9.37% and 13.2%. This sub-category indicates that we have identified the need for counselling with spiritual and religious elements in the thematic

areas called existential frustration in 76.06%, and in the thematic areas of psychiatric indications in 23.93% (Table 4).

**Table 4.** The results of the categorization of crisis with spiritual and religious elements in the area of internet counselling with spiritual and religious dimensions.

| | |
|---|---|
| Existential frustration | 76.06% |
| Possible psychiatric indications | 23.93% |

n = 117, p < 0.001, $\chi^2$ = 31.8

When we were delineating the frustration in the observed contexts, we have analogically proceeded from the thesis of Frankl, who believed that in the case of a purposeless life, which is sometimes called an existential vacuum, we could encounter problematic behaviour [51]. A purposeful life or life with meaning could entail here the ability to fulfil one's basic needs, his or her existential needs, having a goal to do something or to love someone, or generally to see the meaning and purpose of life and fulfil one's life with meaning [51, p. 143]. Frankl believed that values are essential in building a meaningful life [52]. He saw values as universal. They typically express themselves in certain situations, i.e. when the human being has the opportunity to enrich the world with his activity (*creative values*). In other cases, the individual should enrich himself or herself with *experiential values*, and in border situations, there is room only for the realization of *attitude values*. Even if this description is important in practice, it has some issues. This is why we are offering here three representative examples.

*"Lately I have been suffering a lot...my parents will divorce, we will move, some friends have turned their backs on me...Why are people so evil... But the worst for me is the divorce... I cannot bear it anymore... I cry constantly... I am afraid of waking up, and I am scared of what will happen to me... life has hit me hard, but I do not know...Everyday it is worse…I would prefer not to be. I hate my life and myself… I constantly remember those moments, when everything seemed right…without care, and now all has fallen upon me! I really cannot bear to go on anymore; nobody knows what I am experiencing, ….I do not want to end up at a psychiatric ward...but I am afraid of every day…all breathing…all life, what is in store for me. I ask myself, can it be even worse? I need help to be able to overcome this…"* (Source: entry data)

*"I have depression, I am afraid of death; I do not have the ability to be happy. I cannot discover the meaning of life."* (Source: entry data)

Among psychiatric indications, we have also included the need for counselling, which did entail asocial behaviour, and cases where institutional psychiatric care would be necessary, also of acute suicidal tendencies, dependencies, and damage to consciousness. We also realize that the diagnosis for these cases can only be given by a psychiatrist, but in the case of multidisciplinary tasking, these issues have to be also addressed by a spiritual or social counsellor. Gabura recommends observing the presence of paranoid

thoughts, inability to live in reality, inability to form a judgement, loss of memory and orientation, quick changes to strong affective responses, damage to the emotions, thinking and will [37].

*"My problems would be called by most psychiatrists as paranoid schizophrenia, - But for the past 13 years, I am convinced that I am the victim of telepathy (until my sixteenth year I did not have any such problem) - from some crazy people (monsters), who on an everyday basis influence me. One of them is actually obsessed with sex (devil), and I met this person many times earlier on. I have encountered this person paradoxically in the church. How is it possible? That is a very long history (...) - I cannot think properly and often I cannot form a proper judgment, I cannot sleep because of this, it changes my face, my memory suffers, my ability to think rationally suffers - When the pressure abates all is stabilized and I can think properly, (...)."* (Source: entry data)

In this case, of course, the most effective option remaining is to use the methods of crisis intervention, that is, working with the client in a situation, which he or she is experiencing, and which the client considers critical, unfortunate, or endangering. These techniques help to identify what the client is experiencing and enable them to terminate counterproductive or life-threatening events affecting the client. Crisis intervention concentrates only on those elements which have an immediate impact on his or her situation [53]. In this regard, Roberts has identified seven possible stages in crisis intervention. These include the following: 1) plan and conduct and thorough bio-psychological and lethality/imminent danger assessment; 2) make psychological contact and rapidly establish relationships; 3) identify the major problems, including crisis precipitants; 4) encourage exploration of feelings and emotions; 5) generate and explore alternatives; 6) restore functioning through the implementation of an action plan; 7) follow-up [54-57].

## 4. Conclusions

We participated in the research as neutral observers, which in certain instances gave us a rare methodological moment - not to influence the observed phenomenon. We also experienced certain limitations in gathering additional data. Nevertheless, the realized research demonstrates some important and valuable conclusions.

The need for an interdisciplinary approach in counselling with spiritual and religious elements has been clearly shown by our research results. Even if this fact had been acknowledged before and is not new, it is necessary to identify the areas where it is especially needed. It was also essential to emphasize the risks that can occur when one does not utilize the holistic approaches to solving the problems of the client. We believe that it is fortunate that in many theological school environments, there is an independent discipline called social counselling and that this subject is considered a valuable part of the program. The research at hand has partly offered a 'glimpse into the confessionary'. The anonymity of internet counselling has offered a parallel to the secrecy of the

confessionary and offered an area of self-realization and self-transcendent space without fear from repression. The observed contacts were often probed regarding their expectations and tests of resilience.

We believe that we have offered a sketch of what a person can experience in terms of religious and spiritual issues and what role these could play in the overall satisfaction of such a person. The need for interdisciplinary approaches has been shown to be crucial in our research from many vantage points. We emphasize the effectiveness of social techniques for spiritual or pastorally orientated (social) counselling, but we also recommend not to neglect spiritual and religious aspects of the human life [58] and medical, psychological, social, and educational disciplines. The created categories will perhaps enable us to develop diagnostic strategies that would aim to discern the client's problem and to identify methods of intervention whenever counselling is offered by a volunteer or an inexperienced or indecisive professional. Here we do not mean only counselling dealing with religious or spiritual values, but also counselling involving more general forms of social, psychological, and educational counselling.

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