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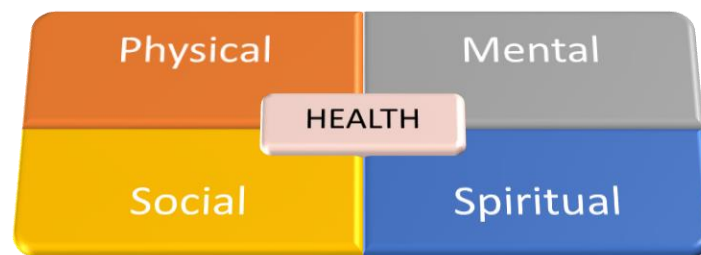
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The Challenge of a Definition for Spirituality with a “Four Domains” Model

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As the societal distinction between spirituality and religion increases, spirituality has lost a lot of its stigma. Most people now realize that humans are naturally spiritual beings, and that, just like other physical or mental health, spiritual health requires deliberation and intention on the part of the individual. Even the Canadian military community now commonly emphasizes the interdependence between, not only the physical, social, and mental/psychological realms, but also “spiritual fitness,” and has begun to incorporate those relationships within their training systems and deliverables. By accepting spiritual resilience as a qualification for deployment readiness in the Army Strategy in 2014, a subtle anthropological shift has occurred through this inclusion of extra-materialistic terms (i.e. spirituality) in the identification of a soldier.² Revealed is an implicit acknowledgement that all people are somewhat spiritual, or at the very least have a spiritual element to their personhood. What was formerly believed to be reserved only for “religious people” has been extended to everyone, and appears to be reflective of the overall consensus of the greater society, which is why the conceptual transition was barely noticeable.

In creating the crucial tools for supporting the holistic wellbeing of military personnel through cultivating various kinds of “health” or “fitness” – physical, psychological/mental, social and spiritual -- establishing precise and accurate definitions of these concepts is a worthwhile pursuit. While acknowledging some overlap, natural to the social or soft sciences that deal with “organic” subject matter, definitions allow the four domains to demarcate their “arcs of fire” and areas of responsibility. However, although the temptation to stove-pipe these four domains by demarcating four independent but overlapping spheres is a convenient and appealing means of presenting the subject matter (such as in the illustration below), such categorization raises serious concerns.



Namely, spirituality is unlike the other categories in its relationship to and with the other domains, in spite of popular descriptions of spirituality such as “the deepest values and meanings by which people live” or “the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things.” The difficulty with such definitions is that by

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² Canada, Department of National Defence, *The Army Strategy: Advancing with Purpose* (3rd ed), 2014, 12.

describing spirituality in qualitative terms (i.e. as a quality in or of a person involving their values, attitudes or acts), inevitably leads to compartmentalization; it treats spirituality as a substance that can be measured, at least theoretically.³ In fact, all definitions of spirituality, no matter how well-intended, tend to compartmentalize spiritual concepts, and by doing so, are counterproductive to their intent; they are unable to capture the complexity and beauty of the interdependent relationships to which they make reference. The biologist's dilemma holds true for spirituality as the poet William Wordsworth once wrote, "sweet is the lore which Nature brings; our meddling intellect misshapes the beauteous forms of things: We murder to dissect." In avoiding this inadvertent butchering of the essence of who we are from both a human and divine perspective, perhaps spirituality can be better likened to some poetic metaphors, such as "the wave beneath the ship of self" or "the fuel within the vehicle of personhood." Yet, these, too, lack, since spirituality is depicted as a substance contained in or underpinning an individual.

Treating spirituality as a component or compartment of the human being makes it a manageable "thing" and very palatable to the scientific mindset; a controllable substance for scientific endeavors. However in the more elusive – yet admittedly far from perfect – view, which depicts spirituality as a force or fuel, spirituality is still observable but not necessarily measureable, which is, *albeit*, frustrating for programming. The ancients struggled with the same issues regarding the delineation between body, mind and soul, and were never successful in reconciling the phenomenon. This is due to the age-old metaphysical dilemma of subjects observing themselves objectively. Throughout history, all attempts by human beings who thought they had solved such endless riddles, resulted in a fuzzier state in the end. The inquisitions are a perfect example of the tragic dangers of attempting to impact spiritual notions with physical instruments. The inquisitor sought to purify the soul by physical instruments of fire, water and metal. We see a repeat of this temptation to affect possible spiritual illness by exclusively physical instruments in some of the mental health treatments of the modern age through electric shock and other controversial tools.⁴ We have come a long way since. Yet today our temptations involve treating existential crisis, contradictions within value systems, conflicts between vocations, issues with regards to identity, worldview, meaning and purpose, etc. in simply physiological and psychological terms. These "spiritual" dilemmas are sometimes exclusively treated by pharmaceuticals since the materialist presumption is that alleged "spiritual" conditions, have little to do with physical or psychological ones, in full accordance with the four domain type categorizations. For instance, treating mental disorder with anything other than physical instruments is perceived as a regression to medieval medicine. Yet, at least in the military, this narrowmindedness is slowly changing. Even in civilian society, there is an overall increase in humility with regards to the sphere of the "unknown"; a field that seems to gain more and more terrain every year as a direct consequence to globalization and heightened flow of information. All this is simply to suggest that compartmentalizing spirituality from other

³ For example, see John Fisher, "The Four Domains Model: Connecting Spirituality, Health and Well-Being," *Religions* 2, 2011, 17-28; doi:10.3390/rel2010017 which, although rightly addresses and wisely expresses the concern by emphasizing spirituality as not simply a component by *the* "fundamental dimension of people's overall health and well-being, permeating and integrating all the other dimensions of health", it cannot but help but limit the scope of this "dimension" in its very treatment of it as a "dimension".

⁴ Michel Foucault explores these connections in the *History of Madness* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

domains is less helpful than simply acknowledging and reaffirming its importance *to the other domains*, even if ambiguity remains.

The challenge of presenting a definition of spirituality pivots around the age-old hermeneutical question that there are no neutral media,⁵ popularized by social critics and philosophers such as Neil Postman and Marshall McLuhan: "the media is the message". In essence, the form of definition is not necessary appropriate for the content of that which that definition seeks to define. In the case of a definition for spirituality, any definition limits the widest understanding and view of its "content" because of the parameters implicitly set by defining *anything*. The problem is that spirituality is not a "thing" but an "influence". In philosophical terms, it belongs to the field of phenomenology and not ontology. Spirituality's uniqueness is diminished *via* any description that limits it. Again, definitions tend to describe it as a compartment of the ship, instead of the wave underneath. It is perceived as a tool in the vehicle as opposed to the fuel in the tank. Objectifying spirituality reduces it to materialist concepts by utilizing materialistic language, which we are all prone to doing, and incapable of not doing. The only vocabulary that could accurately describe spirituality would need to be so unique that it would be incomprehensible to us because it would necessarily lack references to other non-spiritual concepts. In other words, spirituality remains a mystery and cannot be clearly defined . . . evidently, to our endless frustration, as we continue to seek an airtight definition that fits our preexistent metaphysical categories. We may see the results of good or bad spirituality, but cannot define the cause. One can observe a moving ship without "seeing" the wind. One can identify the movement of a vehicle from one point to the next although the fuel remains entirely hidden from human observation.

Furthermore, even if a definition of spirituality was able to capture the widest spectrum of its meanings, it would still be underpinned by theological presuppositions, as is the case with most meaningful definitions construed within the social sciences. Thus, once again, a definition of spirituality limits. All definitions do. They must exclude in order to make sense. Definitions set parameter around how one is to think about the topic. When we do not properly acknowledge these parameters, we do ourselves a disservice. In the case of spirituality, we minimize its importance, however unintentionally. For instance, spirituality is usually depicted in terms of *progression* (i.e. changing from one state to a better one) in contradistinction with terms of *identification*, which have little to do with moral improvement/development or appeal to an internal force. The treatment of spirituality in classic Lutheranism, more honestly acknowledges some key phenomenological irreconcilable dichotomies of life, faith or belief regarding one's relationship with, or position before, a higher being, etc. Spirituality is not viewed so much as a quality, but as the consequence of a reality, due to a change of position before God (i.e. *simul iustus et peccator*), or even as a description of one's new state or "status" before God. The Christian is described as "being spiritual" as opposed to "having spirituality." In the Judea-Christian Scripture, exegetically, the word is not that common and is mainly discussed in juxtaposing Christian identity from paganism and Gnosticism, in which spirituality is only understood as a measurable innate quality of select people such as the Corinthian context.⁶ Yet, St. Paul uses the term descriptively of Christian identity, and, thus, in good Lutheran fashion, grounds it

⁵ In textual hermeneutics, this can be restated as a confusion of distinctions between the formal and material principle.

⁶ For instance, see I Cor 2:13, Gal 6:1.

in the realm of ordinary life. Again, most definitions of spirituality, whether they are framed in terms of transcendence or immanence, tend to remove it from ordinary life and disconnect it from ordinary vocation. After all, if spirituality is primarily a personal and inward quality, religion is reduced to a system of the moral improvement of the individual, which may or may not include works of love towards other people. Spirituality defined as a quality reinforces a compartmentalization that minimizes the possibility of the hidden work of the Divine throughout the vocations of ordinary life; a spiritual view that gives deeper meaning to the mundane tasks of the day with healthy practical and measureable side-effects. In military culture, “progression,” “development” and “fitness” are the language of the three other domains and is thus easily transferred to thinking and speaking about spirituality. Unsurprisingly, it is completely in line with current understandings and emphasis upon of the “use” of spirituality as a therapeutic or ethical enabler. Obviously, in the military, determining the practical purpose of spirituality as a “value-added” is more important than the nature of spirituality of which most would deem as an irrelevant philosophical question, despite its critical bearing on how we understand personhood and explain overall resilience in soldiers (or lack of!). Yet, by adopting that language and conceptualization, spirituality’s usefulness to the other domains is severely undermined. By such objectification, materialization and compartmentalization, spirituality is deprived of its ability to be the unique lens from which one views all the other domains

In short, not only do we import the ways we think about the physical, mental/psychological and social domains to this one, the presuppositions under a definition of spirituality are often informed by a pre-existent definition of spirituality! My humble suggestion for moving ahead – and without tumbling into mysticism via apophatic theology – is to avoid any definition at all, and instead utilize descriptions of spirituality for its conceptual conveyance, or even incorporate its vast array of proposed synonyms into that dialogue. Perhaps exploring negative definitions of what spirituality is not, or what unhealthy spirituality looks like (by reference to case studies, for example), may have some more practical benefit in a military environment. In summary leaving the notion open ended seems to be more honest and “useful” than operating with a classical form of definition which, again, by its very nature, limits the way one can think about the phenomenon or concept. On the bright side, one can improve the sail on a boat to make it more effective at harnessing the power generated by the wind, without ever requiring a definition of the wind. Certainly, spirituality is not an easy thing to define . . . but neither is being human!