This course is designed for applied psychology and counseling students interested in better understanding and responding to clients and community members whose symbolic worlds include a religious or spiritual framework. In order to develop tools with which to engage such frameworks with sympathetic yet critical understanding, it will integrate perspectives on spirituality with approaches to psychological treatment and interventions. These approaches include: attachment theory, cognitive behavioral therapy, constructivist work on meaning making with regard to personal narrative, and various perspectives on psychological trauma and addiction.

The course explores various perspectives in which the concept of meaning-making can bridge spirituality, sacred texts, and psychological treatment. As a starting point, we take spirituality to refer to a set of practices (including behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs) by which individuals and groups relate to cosmic order and which may be influenced by, but are not necessarily constrained within, religious systems. Religion is understood as a culturally determined system of symbols within which individuals and groups construct meaning and identity in relationship to perceived cosmic order. Because it pertains to the practices of the individual, spirituality is more immediately relevant for psychotherapy than is religion, while religion remains pertinent to the extent that it may influence the individual’s spirituality.

Among spiritual practices, we will give special attention to how individuals read, interpret, internalize, and are shaped by the narratives and metaphors of their sacred texts. In this regard, our discussion will engage the psychosocial functioning of the texts, i.e., their capacity consciously and unconsciously to affect individuals and collectives. Recognizing the religious diversity of client populations, we will consider each topic in terms of principles that are broadly applicable across particular spiritualities and religions. For clinicians working in the United States, among the most pervasively influential sacred texts are those of the Bible, a term that applies to the Hebrew Scriptures sacred to both Jews and Christians, and to the New Testament sacred to Christians. Even for clients who may self-describe as “spiritual but not religious” these texts often exercise a deep if ambivalent influence. This is even more the case for clients for whom the Bible is authoritative. We will investigate specifically how psychological perspectives on the appropriation of the Bible in both ancient and contemporary contexts open fruitful paths for treatment with individuals for whom the Bible carries authority. Students familiar with sacred texts other than the Bible are encouraged to bring them into class discussion.
Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able:
- to articulate how the concept of meaning-making can serve as a tool that allows the clinician to integrate a client’s spirituality, especially regarding relevant sacred texts, in the therapeutic process;
- to develop tools for assessing the greater or lesser degree to which the appropriation of spiritual beliefs/practices promotes the client’s wellbeing;
- to develop strategies for affirming appropriation of spiritual beliefs/practices that promote wellbeing, and for assisting clients in reassessing and reworking those that do not, drawing upon the clinician’s knowledge of relevant spiritual traditions, especially sacred texts;
- to demonstrate an accurate general grasp of the functions of biblical texts that promote wellbeing in the client’s relationships with self, God, others, and world;
- to demonstrate an accurate grasp of major theoretical material presented in the course and an ability to engage in research relevant to psychological practice.

Course Requirements:
Regular attendance, and informed participation in class. (10%) Preparation for each class includes a written response to the assigned readings of 100–300 words that discusses something you found insightful, surprising, or puzzling. (15%) A written assignment assessing the potential psychosocial functioning of a biblical text in a present-day context. (15%) Project phase 1 – case, annotated bibliography, 1 page of discussion (20%) Project phase 2 – same (revised) case and bibliography, 5–7 pages of discussion (40%)

Required books: (Additional articles will be assigned and made available via CANVAS.)

Recommended books:

Schedule of topics:

**MODULE 1: Spirituality, sacred text, and meaning-making in psychological practice**

Class 1 – Religion and spirituality in psychological perspective:
Symbolic representation in the (re-)forming of relationships and the emergence of the self
Class 2 – Meaning-making:  
A concept bridging spirituality, sacred text, familiar discourse, and personal narrative

Class 3 – The Bible as sacred texts with human origins:  
Considering the psychosocial function of biblical texts in their ancient contexts

Class 4 – Spiritual practice and sacred texts:  
Considering the psychosocial function of sacred texts in present-day contexts

MODULE 2: Constructing a matrix in which to “hold” experience of loss, cultivate secure attachment, and reconstruct disrupted narrative

Class 5 – Loss and grief in psychological, spiritual, and scriptural perspectives:  
Sacred texts as resources for responding to loss

Class 6 – Attachment theory and relating to God:  
Cultivating secure attachment to God by “holding” trust and protest, joy and lament

Class 7 – Meaning-making in the wake of disrupted narrative:  
Distinguishing the harmful from the healing potential of sacred texts

Class 8 – Cathexis, spiritual practice, and the adaptation of desire:  
The function of aesthetics and reframing in addressing loss through spirituality

MODULE 3: Symbolic representation in recovery from traumatic stress and addiction

Class 9 – CBT and spirituality in responding to traumatic stress:  
Sacred texts as resources for establishing safety, processing emotions, and affirming dignity, agency, and solidarity

Class 10 – Addressing the traumatic roots of addictive or compulsive behavior:  
Regarding 12-step literature as sacred text

MODULE 4: Spirituality, sacred text, practitioner, and client

Class 11 – Spirituality and the clinician as “wounded healer”:  
Sacred text as resource for empathy, self-care, and mitigating vicarious traumatization

Class 12 – Engaging the client’s spirituality in psychotherapy:  
Possibilities and limitations
Class 13 – Presentation of projects in class