

Relational Spirituality, Differentiation, and Mature Alterity

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“This is the true meaning of ... listening for the genuine in another. Such an experience cannot become a dogma – it has to remain experiential all the way. It is a probing process trying to find the opening into another. And it requires exposure, sustained exposure. One of the great obstacles to such exposure is the fact of segregation. The religious experience as I have known it seems to swing wide the door, not merely into Life but into lives.”

Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness* (1965)¹

Howard Thurman (1889-1981) was a pastor, practical theologian, and social activist whose writings display a rich integration of spiritual formation, psychology, intercultural awareness, and commitment to social justice. The quote above comes during the turbulent civil rights era in a book in which Thurman combines an interdisciplinary account of the evils and psychological toxicity of racism and segregation with an understanding of the central role of mature alterity in Christian spiritual formation. For Thurman, spirituality included a process of seeking to understand the perspectives and experiences of others grounded in a relationship with God secure enough to “swing wide the door” of one’s heart and mind.

In this chapter, we offer a brief overview of a differentiation-based relational model of spirituality and transformation which has been articulated in depth elsewhere and then focus on interdisciplinary conceptual frameworks and empirical findings related to a key dimension of that model – alterity. We suggest that alterity or ways of relating to *otherness* involve psychological and spiritual dynamics of relationality, which can promote integrative spiritual formation. Alterity can also be anxiety-provoking, and alterity anxiety can both inhibit or facilitate spiritual transformation depending upon several dynamics we consider below. We will also offer a thesis building upon Thurman and several other theorists that mature, well-differentiated, and humble alterity is a necessary dimension of Christian spiritual maturity.

Relational Spirituality

¹ H. Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 111.

Spirituality is a contested term that is defined in many ways so we will first summarize what we mean by spirituality. We start by building upon the work of Hill and Pargament who offered a descriptive and psychological definition of spirituality as the “search for the sacred” highlighting the active quest of humans to discover the Divine or Ultimate Truth within their particular contexts.² Shults and Sandage adapted this definition to fit an integrative relational framework by defining *relational spirituality* as “ways of relating to the sacred.”³ Humans relate to God and the sacred in a variety of ways (e.g., submission, angry complaint, warm-hearted contemplation, avoidance, purposeful collaboration, terror, etc.). We find an emphasis on relational spirituality helpful for several reasons.

First, within Christian traditions, a relational view of spirituality is consistent with Trinitarian theology and the understanding that God always exists in relationship. God as Trinity exemplifies *differentiated relationality*, that is separate persons existing in intimate and cooperative relationship.⁴ Some models or folk understandings of spiritual formation seem to employ a view of spirituality as a substance one would have more or less of (e.g., “getting my tank filled at church” or “He is not a very spiritual person.”). However, our commitment to Trinitarian and relational theologies suggests the value of conceptualizing spirituality in relational ways rather than viewing spirituality as simply a quantity of an inner substance or essence of an individual.

Second, a focus on relationality also fits our theoretical orientation within social science. Many social science theorists across various models construe the self as constituted in and through relationships.⁵ This relational view of selfhood can readily be integrated with relational views of theological anthropology or personhood. The growing field of interpersonal neurobiology has provided evidence that our limbic brains are imprinted with relational templates that move us toward familiar relational patterns, that is unless there is a limbic transformation.⁶ Psychological research has also validated the earlier theories of many psychoanalysts that relational experiences, particularly attachment-based experiences, can shape templates used in forming God images and theological beliefs.⁷ For example, those who have an insecure style of attachment are more likely to have difficulty experiencing God as consistently and warmly present compared to those with a secure style of attachment. Many different contemporary models of psychotherapy also emphasize relationality and contextualization in contrast to an earlier modernistic or Cartesian view of the de-contextualized individual subject.⁸

² P.C. Hill and K.I. Pargament, “Advances in the Conceptualization and Measurement of Religion and Spirituality”, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 1 (2008): 3-17.

³ F.L. Shults and S.J. Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality: Integrating Theology and Psychology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). Also see T.W. Hall, “Christian Spirituality and Mental Health: A Relational Spirituality Paradigm for Empirical Research”, *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 23 (2004): 66-81.

⁴ J.O. Balswick, P.E. King, and K.S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

⁵ S. Chen, H.C. Boucher, and M.P. Tapias, M.P., “The relational self revealed: Integrative conceptualization and implications for interpersonal life”, *Psychological Bulletin*, 132 (2006): 151-179.

⁶ L. Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Healing the Social Brain* (2nd ed). (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010). T. Lewis, F. Amini, and R. Lannon *A General Theory of Love*. (New York: Vintage, 2000).

⁷ P. Granqvist, M. Mikulincer, and P.R. Shaver, P.R., “Religion as attachment: Normative processes and individual differences”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14, (2010) 49-59. Hall (2004)

⁸ J.C Norcross, *Psychotherapy Relationships that Work: Evidence-Based Responsiveness*, 2nd ed, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Also see Boston Change Process Study Group, *Change in Psychotherapy: A Unifying Paradigm*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).

All of these developments in social science and psychotherapy can be brought into productive integrative conversation with the relational ontology that is central to Christian theology and our understanding of a Christian model of spiritual formation and change.

Third, a relational approach to spirituality can also utilize the psychological lens of human development to consider distinctive ways of relating to sacred. In our model of relational spirituality, we have also found it useful to differentiate spiritual well-being and spiritual maturity at the levels of both theory and research measurement. We have suggested growth toward developmental maturity often involves a stressful, crucible-like process with periodic reductions in spiritual well-being as deconstructive processes lead to a systemic reorganization toward more complex ways of relating with the sacred. Spiritual writers have used various metaphors besides a crucible for these challenging periods of deconstruction – valley, desert, dark night of the soul. Deconstruction does not always lead to spiritual transformation, but we believe transformation is nearly always preceded by an increase in existential anxiety. Spiritual maturity involves working through crucible-like integrity dilemmas and struggles to ultimately integrate spiritual maturity with relatively consistent well-being.

Conversely, some maintain immature forms of spiritual well-being by utilizing defense mechanisms like denial or repression rather than facing difficult realities either within the self (e.g., guilt or ambivalence) or in the world (e.g., consciousness of racism or poverty) or both. William James described a religious temperament of “healthy-mindedness” in which the person focused exclusively on the sunny side of life and remained oblivious to suffering in the world. More recently, this has been described as “illusory spiritual health” or “spiritual bypassing”. It is possible for some to stay in homogeneous spiritual enclaves that prevent exposure to diversity or troubling levels of suffering and oppression.

Fourth, a relational approach to spirituality can also be useful for understanding pathological forms of spiritual development that inhibit growth and maturity. For example, narcissism is a trait that can interfere with the relational virtues of Christian spiritual maturity, such as gratitude, compassion, humility, and forgiveness.⁹ Those who are high in narcissistic forms of relating to the sacred may self-report special insights and intense levels of closeness with God; however interpersonal data will often reveal struggles with entitlement, conflict resolution, or dogmatism.. This can be an important consideration for Christian communities. Narcissistic leaders may seem gifted but can do significant damage to the spiritual formation of persons under their influence.¹⁰ Others struggle with forms of relational spirituality that are more chronically shame-prone or hold relational assumptions of rejection and persecution from both God and others. In some cases, this reflects the influence of trauma on limbic templates and might be perpetuated by fear-based or non-integrative approaches to theological teaching and spiritual formation.

Finally, our relational orientation includes an emphasis on relational dialectics in spiritual formation. While there are many ways of relating to the sacred, two primary dialectical themes are spiritual dwelling and spiritual seeking, drawing on concepts from Wuthnow’s sociology of

⁹ S.J. Sandage and S.P. Moe, “Narcissism and Spirituality”, In *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Findings, and Treatment*, eds. W.K. Campbell and J. Miller (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2011): 410-420.

¹⁰ Sandage and Harden (in press)

religion. Spiritual dwelling involves relatively stable ways of relating to the sacred, while spiritual seeking involves questing toward new ways of relating with the sacred. Spiritual seeking can be part of crucible-like processes that are stressful and destabilizing but may ultimately lead to spiritual transformation and more integrated forms of spiritual dwelling. It is also possible for individuals or communities to seek to maintain a spiritual dwelling that lacks complexity. This may lead to spiritual complacency or developmental arrest. While some faith communities emphasize either the stability of dwelling within spiritual commitments or the open process of spiritual seeking and questing, we have come to see spiritual dwelling and seeking as an ongoing dialectical process within spiritual formation. In research with seminary students we found general linear trends toward *both* increased internalization of faith commitment and increased spiritual questing during seminary.¹¹ This mature capacity to integrate internalized commitments and authentic openness to new understanding is partially captured in the notion of differentiation of self, which we describe below.

Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self (DoS) is a form of relational selfhood that involves the developmental capacity to balance (a) cognitive and emotional functioning and (b) autonomy and connection in relationships.¹² Those who are high in DoS are self-aware with a healthy sense of identity and also generally effective in the self-regulation of emotions. Interpersonally, they can manage independence and solitude while also being able to connecting with others in close relationships. Bonhoeffer spoke to this dialectic in saying the person who cannot be alone is not ready for community, and the person who cannot be in community is not ready to be alone. Those who are low in DoS tend to struggle with emotional reactivity and use emotional cutoff (distancing) or fusion (enmeshment) to manage interpersonal stress. Families, groups, and congregations can also differ in collective levels of DoS. More differentiated systems tend to better in tolerating the anxiety of within-group differences and to show more resilience in adapting to stress and change. DoS involves the mature capacity to value both unity and diversity similar to the Apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 12.

In our empirical studies with Christian graduate-level students at Bethel Seminary, DoS has been positively associated with a wide range of spiritual formation factors, including spiritual well-being, spiritual maturity, interpersonal forgivingness, hope, humility, gratitude, meditative prayer, intercultural competence, and social justice commitment.¹³ DoS has statistically accounted for the connections between several spiritual formation variables. For example, DoS

¹¹ Ian T. Williamson & Steven J. Sandage, "Longitudinal Analyses of Religious and Spiritual Development among Seminary Students," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 12 (2009): 787-801.

¹² Elizabeth A. Skowron and Thomas A. Schmitt, "Assessing Interpersonal Fusion: Reliability and Validity of a New DSI Fusion with Others Subscale," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 29 (2003): 209-222.; Brian Majerus and Steven J. Sandage, "Differentiation of Self and Christian Spiritual Maturity: Social Science and Theological Integration," *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, 38 (2010): 41-51.

¹³ P. J. Jankowski & S.J. Sandage, "Meditative Prayer, Gratitude, and Intercultural Competence: Empirical Test of a Differentiation-Based Model," *Mindfulness*, 5 (2014): 360-372. S.J. Sandage, S. Crabtree, and M. Schweer, "Differentiation of Self and Social Justice Commitment Mediated by Hope," *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 92 (2014): 67-74. S.J. Sandage & M.G. Harden, "Relational Spirituality, Differentiation of Self, and Virtue as Predictors of Intercultural Development," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 14 (2011): 819-838. S.J. Sandage and P.J. Jankowski, "Spirituality, Social Justice, and Intercultural Competence: Mediator Effects of Differentiation of Self," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 37 (2013): 366-374.

has mediated the positive relationship between interpersonal forgivingness and mental health in two studies.¹⁴ DoS also mediated the negative relationship between spiritual well-being and negative emotion in a sample of distressed students, supporting the self-regulatory function of DoS as part of spirituality.¹⁵ We have discussed these connections between DoS, well-being, and spirituality in other places, but we want to focus in the remainder of this chapter on the role of DoS in relational spirituality that promotes healthy and mature alterity.

Theories of Alterity

Relational spirituality is not contained within the individual and therefore necessarily involves otherness. Many traditions view God or the sacred as *other* relative to humans, and certainly this is true in Christianity. Virtually all spiritual traditions raise the question of how the individual ought to engage with others. Sandage and Shults suggested, “One important test of spirituality is the impact on *alterity*.”¹⁶ As mentioned above, alterity refers to how individuals relate to *otherness*. In this section, we engage with the insights of contemporary theorists’ of alterity that inform our understanding of the association between relational spirituality and responses to otherness.

Emmanuel Levinas is one of the most influential phenomenological philosophers of the 20th century. He is well-known for his ethics based in a conception of alterity or otherness. Levinas believed that the foundation of ethics was grounded in human relationships and that the wellspring of moral action is an encounter with another person.¹⁷ For Levinas, the other is not knowable and cannot be reduced any categories that might be imposed by the subject. Therefore, a person will experience the other as distant yet benevolent. He writes, “The Other precisely reveals himself [sic] in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness.”¹⁸ Though the other may present him/herself in a spirit of gentleness, the encounter is inherently disruptive. A Levinasian theorist describes the other as potentially unsettling, “The vulnerability of the other makes me vulnerable, traumatizes me, takes me hostage, puts me in a state of suffering where all I can do is offer my crust of bread, my hope from empty hands.”¹⁹ Levinas asserts that subjects encountering the other are beset with an ethical demand to assume responsibility for the other’s needs. The ‘face’ of the other evokes a primordial emotion of connection within which the ethical demand is inherent. Levinas

¹⁴ Steven J. Sandage, & Peter J. Jankowski, “Forgiveness, Spiritual Instability, Mental Health Symptoms, and Well-Being: Mediation Effects of Differentiation of Self,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 2 (2010): 168-180.

¹⁵ Peter J. Jankowski, & Steven J. Sandage, “Spiritual Dwelling and Well-being: The Mediating Role of Differentiation of Self in a Sample of Distressed Adults,” *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture* (2011): Advance online publication. doi: 10.1080/13674676.2011.579592.

¹⁶ S.J. Sandage & F.L. Shults (2007). “Relational Spirituality and Transformation: A Relational Integration Model”, *Journal of Psychology & Christianity*, 26 (2007): p. 262.

¹⁷ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, (Netherlands: Springer, 1961).

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 150.

¹⁹ D. Orange, *The Suffering Stranger: Hermeneutics for Everyday Clinical Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 63.

downplays the primacy of conscious choice in responding to this call. He insisted that the truly ethical response is found in a passive receptivity to our fundamental responsibility.

Levinas' insights have influenced ethical perspectives in the helping professions. For example, though Levinas was skeptical of psychoanalysis as an institution, a number of psychologists have endeavored to apply his theories to clinical practice. Orange describes several principles of what she calls a 'Levinasian therapeutics'. Clinicians adhering to this approach a) welcome clients in a spirit of simplicity, humility and patience, b) refrain from judging whether clients 'deserve' hospitality, c) avoid clinical 'violence' in the form of undue labeling and the imposition of cultural categories, and d) accept responsibility for attending to the client's needs while downplaying relational reciprocity. Orange asserts that the ethical demand inherent to encountering the client requires therapists to suspend their needs for mutuality and control in the therapeutic relationship.²⁰ Dueck and Reimer have offered some similar applications of Levinas to psychology from a Christian perspective and with more attention to cultural diversity.

While Levinas has had a profound influence on our understanding of benevolent responses to otherness, some of his assertions have been called into question by other theorists of alterity. One point of criticism focuses on Levinas' insistence that the other is "absolutely other", in that they are irreducible to categories imposed by the self.²¹ Ricoeur asserts that for Levinas "the other represents absolute exteriority with respect to an ego defined by the condition of separation. The other, in this sense, absolves himself of any relation."²² Benjamin develops a nuanced psychoanalytic theory of intersubjectivity that challenges the idea of "absolute exteriority." She asserts, like Levinas, that alterity must be acknowledged so that the other is not reduced to a projection of the self. However, perceiving an individual to be *totally* other allows the possibility for the self to repudiate and exclude the other. In a less afflicting sense, it also permits the other to be patronized. They may be viewed as a project that stands to benefit from the salubrious or "rescuing" effects of contact with the self.

For Benjamin, a balance must be found between recognizing otherness and apprehending points of similarity and convergence. She asserts that a healthy relationship to alterity requires that we occupy the dynamic space between understanding the other as different and understanding the other as an ego, a subject that shares in our human condition. If the other is absolutely other, they are not subjects but objects to be assimilated, repudiated, or manipulated at the will of the self. We find it hard to exclude that which is the same, but are free to exclude that which is totally other. For Benjamin, inclusion rests at the heart of an ethical alterity and is predicated on the recognition of similarity as well as distance. Such an orientation is compatible with differentiation of self (DoS) described above. Benjamin's intersubjectivity may be understood as intrapersonally and interpersonally differentiated. That is, she asserts the need for

²⁰ D. Orange, *The Suffering Stranger: Hermeneutics for Everyday Clinical Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2011).

²¹ J. Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Routledge, 1998).

²² P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992). 188-189.

a harmonious self who a) tolerates the tension evoked by the difference and similarity of the other and b) maintains a sense of selfhood within the context of an intimate encounter.

A theological companion to the work of Benjamin is that of Miroslav Volf. Volf (1996) asserts that the question of alterity is an inextricable component of any solid understanding of social realities. He asserts the need for recognizing distance and having adequate respect for otherness. He writes, “Belonging without distance destroys.”²³ However, he also asserts that benevolent responses to otherness must incorporate differentiated identification with the other. Volf recognizes the existence of strong cultural divides and acknowledges the presence and potential for seemingly intransigent conflicts between self and other. To address the divisions between individuals, he provides a theological basis for the assertion that the self is ultimately connected with the other on an intimate level.

First, he establishes the principle that others should be loved by us as they are loved by God. We are connected in that we are all created and loved by God. Volf writes, “The exclusion of the other is an exclusion of God.”²⁴ Then he articulates a second point of identification: the shared legacy of sin before God. For Volf, we find similarity in that we are all sinners who fall short of our ultimate end, to love and serve God and others. While the other is distant in many ways, they are close in God’s love and shared iniquity. Volf draws on Christian theology to affirm that these similarities are at the ontological heart of the self. “Why should I embrace the other? The answer is simple: because the others *are* a part of my own true identity. I cannot live authentically without welcoming the others...for I am created to reflect the personality of the triune God.”²⁵ The perspectives of both Benjamin and Volf offer a theory of alterity that seeks balance between the distance and intimacy of the other and promotes a differentiated form of relationality in which alterity is neither minimized nor idealized.

Another point of contention in Levinas may be found in his implication that the traumatic encounter with the other necessarily calls for a benevolent response. Whatever the ontological nature of this call, it is clear that encounters with otherness do not always elicit compassion and understanding. Benjamin agrees with the Levinasian view that an encounter with the other is a disruptive, sometimes traumatic, event that can make us aware of our limitations. She writes, “The world exposes us to the *different* others who, not only in their mere existence as separate beings reflect our lack of control, but who also threaten to evoke in us what we have repudiated in order to protect the self”.²⁶ However, as was alluded to earlier, she recognizes that this disruption can have negative consequences. First, the other may be perceived as a threat that must be excluded or harmed. Second, one may wish to assimilate the other; that is reducing them

²³ M. Volf, “Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of ‘Ethnic Cleansing’”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 29, (1992): 230-248, 236.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 241.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 248.

²⁶ J. Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Routledge, 1998). 95.

to the fixed categories of the self, thereby negating their distinct identity. Finally, the self may become so overwhelmed by the presence of the other that they allow themselves to be consumed and their own identity negated. Meeting the other is not always positive. Benjamin argues that these pitfalls may be avoided if the self is able face and accept the paradoxical distance and intimacy of the other.

Volf also recognized the peril of encountering the other. Similar to Benjamin, he asserts that excluding and negating the other is an attempt to re-center the self, thus avoiding the dread of self-negation.²⁷ Additionally, legitimate transgressions may cause the self to experience the other as violent, oppressive and pernicious. For Volf, there are several ways the self may address this problem, allowing for inclusion of the other. From a theological frame, one may re-center oneself in the love of Christ, thus making room for loving the other. One may expand this Christian view to include other forms of ultimate meaning that call for a re-centering of self. Volf also champions the need for humility in assessing the nature of the other. He writes, “We need more adequate judgment based on a distinction between legitimate ‘differentiation’ and illegitimate ‘exclusion’ and made with humility that counts with our proclivity to misperceive and misjudge.”²⁸

Levinas’ perspective on alterity is not altogether distant from these views. It can be asserted that Levinas was not inattentive to the subjectivity of the other or the potential for deleterious encounters. He asserted that recognizing the face or humanity of the other is a wellspring of the social justice demand to give and serve.²⁹ He was also no stranger to the callousness with which the self can meet the other, having experienced imprisonment in the Nazi death camps first-hand. We like to think of Benjamin and Volf as sharpening some of Levinas’ foundational points to create space for differentiated aspects of lived experience which Levinas may have been less focused upon. Levinas emphasized the ethical imperative to care for the other, which is rooted in something other than rationality. Drawing upon ethical roots in the Hebrew Bible, he emphasized the ontological nature of that call, similar to the way Thurman draws upon Christian traditions. The others we have discussed in this section offer an understanding of the practical implications of that call, given the need to negotiate intimacy and otherness. In doing so, they provide insights on what constitutes an inclusive and differentiated alterity.

Levinas’ perceives our experience of the face of the other as the foundation of ethics. This is compatible with Ricoeur’s conception of *solicitude* (benevolent concern for the other) as essential to a just ethics.³⁰ Ricoeur understands ethical intention “as aiming at *the good life* with

²⁷ M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 1996) 70

²⁸ Ibid, 68.

²⁹ E. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985).

³⁰ P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992). 188-189.

and for others, in just institutions”.³¹ This is distinguished from morality, which is defined as the expression of this aim in terms of norms, obligations and duties of action. Benevolent alterity is comprised of both (a) differentiated perceptions of self and others, and (b) an ethical orientation to the good and socially just moral action. Recent empirical studies have explored the psychological and ethical or moral dimensions of alterity in association with relational spirituality, with particular focus on constructs such as intercultural sensitivity and social justice. To these studies we turn in the next section.

Empirical Research on Alterity and Relational Spirituality

The theoretical perspectives on alterity from philosophy, relational psychoanalysis, and theology reveal the complexity of this construct. We have tried to operationalize alterity with some degree of parsimony by focusing on two relevant constructs: (a) intercultural competence, and (b) social justice commitment. Within the field of psychology, there is a growing theoretical recognition that intercultural competence and a commitment to social justice are important but distinct professional qualities. Yet there has been limited research investigating both constructs together. We have not found relevant research that has used literature on alterity as part of a conceptual framework.

Intercultural competence (IC) involves the developmental capacity to relate sensitively and effectively across cultural differences. IC involves capacities for awareness of cultural differences in combination with intercultural knowledge and relational skills. While some might consider intercultural competence separate from spiritual formation, our research has found the opposite. We have measured intercultural competence using the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a sophisticated assessment tool that uses computer-generated algorithms for scoring. Among seminary students, IDI scores were positively associated with spiritual well-being, gratitude, meditative prayer, humility, and spiritual seeking.³² Intercultural competence is also negatively associated with two indices of spiritual pathology – spiritual grandiosity and spiritual instability. The interculturally-competent practice of frame-shifting, or reflecting on the perspective of someone who is culturally different from oneself, is conducive to effective ministry in diverse settings and is associated with healthy Christian formation and interpersonal well-being. Given the correlations the IDI and various facets of spiritual formation, we consider the IDI one of the best available indices of Christian spiritual maturity.

Intercultural minimization is probably the most common orientation toward cultural diversity in educational, training, and ministry contexts and involves an ethnocentric focus on similarities across cultural groups to limit alterity anxiety. Emphasizing similarities can be effective in some situations, such as developing initial unity and generating concern for equality. But it is problematic when used perpetually. Minimization ignores the richness of differences impacting intercultural interactions. An intercultural stance that “we are all really alike” does not lead to differentiated understanding of meaningful cultural differences. It can also deny

³¹ Ibid, 172.

³² P. J. Jankowski & S.J. Sandage, “Meditative Prayer, Gratitude, and Intercultural Competence: Empirical Test of a Differentiation-Based Model”, *Mindfulness*, 5 (2014): 360-372. S.J. Sandage & M.G. Harden, “Relational Spirituality, Differentiation of Self, and Virtue as Predictors of Intercultural Development”, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 14 (2011): 819-838. S.J. Sandage and P.J. Jankowski, “Spirituality, Social Justice, and Intercultural Competence: Mediator Effects of Differentiation of Self”, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 37 (2013): 366-374.

dynamics of social privilege and oppression. In some religious contexts, theological principles or perspectives may be used to support intercultural minimization. This typically involves undervaluing contextualization in theology, missions, and ministry. One could believe a theological proposition is universally true (e.g., God is sovereign), but effective ministry demands effective application of truth in context. Those who operate from intercultural minimization tend to struggle with such contextualization.

Some in conservative Christian contexts have suggested intercultural minimization is necessary for avoiding moral relativism, yet minimization was not associated with even mid-level conventional moral development in a study of undergraduates. Higher levels of intercultural competence were positively associated with moral development.³³ These findings suggest intercultural competence is more conducive to morality than minimization.

Defensiveness and reversal are two forms of intercultural polarization which can also inhibit intercultural competence. Those operating from intercultural defensiveness assume their culture is superior to others. Those engaging in reversal feel their own culture is inferior while other cultures are idealized. Both polarized orientations generate considerable levels of negative emotion in intercultural encounters – anger and paranoia for intercultural defensiveness and shame or guilt for intercultural reversal. These polarized templates impede mature alterity by making it difficult to accurately understand other cultures or one's own cultural influences. Intercultural experiences become more negative than reinforcing.

Social Justice Commitment is the second dimension in our view of mature alterity and can be defined as “active concerns and commitments related to social justice advocacy.”³⁴ There has been a growing literature on social justice commitment in psychology and other helping professions.³⁵ A commitment to social justice is emphasized in some Christian traditions, including our own primary religious backgrounds (SJS – Wesleyan; DRP – Catholic; JM – Quaker). However, social justice has long generated debates, particularly within conservative Christian contexts. Some have warned that “social justice” efforts can compromise the essence of the Gospel.³⁶ We have published four studies of SJC with Christian seminary students and, like IC, have found it to be positively associated with a variety of salutary spiritual formation factors, including hope, forgiveness, DoS, humility, and positive religious coping.³⁷ Our SJC measure focuses on a concern for women, persons of color, and the impoverished. These studies, using Christian samples, suggest social justice concerns are consistent with healthy Christian spiritual formation.

³³ Leilani Endicott, Tonia Bock, & Darcia Narvaez, “Moral Reasoning, Intercultural Development, and Multicultural Experiences: Relations and Cognitive Underpinnings,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27 (2003): 403-419.

³⁴ S.J. Sandage and J. Morgan, “Hope and Positive Religious Coping as Predictors of Social Justice Commitment”, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 17 (2014): 557-567, 558.

³⁵ Ibid, 557.

³⁶ Ibid, 565.

³⁷ P.J. Jankowski, S.J. Sandage, and P.C. Hill, “Differentiation-based Models of Forgiveness, Mental Health and Social Justice Commitment: Mediators Effects for Differentiation of Self and Humility”, *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8 (2013): 412-424. S.J. Sandage and J. Morgan, “Hope and Positive Religious Coping as Predictors of Social Justice Commitment”, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 17 (2014): 557-567. S.J. Sandage and P.J. Jankowski, “Spirituality, Social Justice, and Intercultural Competence: Mediator Effects of Differentiation of Self”, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 37 (2013): 366-374. S.J. Sandage, S. Crabtree, and M. Schweer, “Differentiation of Self and Social Justice Commitment Mediated by Hope”, *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 92 (2014): 67-74.

The positive correlation between hope and SJC has been replicated, supporting the claims of social justice theorists and theologians including Martin Luther King, Jr., Cornell West, Paulo Freire, A. Elaine Brown Crawford, Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, James Cone, and Jurgen Moltmann³⁸ The fact that SJC is positively associated with hope (but not gratitude) and IC with gratitude (but not hope) in our studies further suggests these are differing aspects of alterity, which empirically map onto somewhat different virtues. Yet both SJC and IC have been positively associated with DoS and humility. DoS mediated in the relationship between spiritual well-being and SJC in one study,³⁹ and both DoS and humility mediated the relationship between forgiveness and SJC in another.⁴⁰ This supports our theory that DoS is a central underlying dynamic in healthy relational spirituality and mature alterity, as well as our growing attention to humility in our empirical and conceptual work. DoS and humility form a useful set of core constructs for integrative work on spiritual formation and alterity since DoS is a term that emerged in social science and humility has a long history in theology, spirituality, and virtue ethics.

Practical Implications

We will briefly describe some practical spiritual formation and training implications of the theory and research reviewed above on relational spirituality and alterity.

First, IC and SJC were only modestly positively correlated overall in our research, suggesting there is a need to emphasize both in spiritual formation programming and training. The correlation between these two dimensions of alterity gets much stronger at high levels of IC, which points to mature alterity as an integration of IC and SJC. Some individuals exhibit a high level of SJC without corresponding competence across cultural differences. This could lead to sincere efforts at social justice activism that are ineffective when actual cultural differences are encountered. We have seen this many times from well-intentioned ministers, counselors, missionaries, or activists who desire to make a positive difference in contexts of oppression but end up offending others with differing cultural frameworks.

Second, our research shows both IC and SJC are related to spiritual formation and relational maturity in Christian samples. Thus, training efforts encouraging mature alterity can be framed as part of healthy Christian spiritual formation and relational development rather than a left-wing political agenda. Also, it is important to consider that trainees who are struggling in spiritual formation or relational development (e.g., high grandiosity, insecure attachment) might have difficulty progressing toward IC and SJC. We do not know the causal directions in how these factors are related, but our practical experience suggests diversity training and social justice work both necessitate attention to relational growth and healthy practices of self-regulation (i.e.,

³⁸ See Sandage and Morgan (2014), 558-561, and Sandage, Crabtree, and Schweer (2014), 69.

³⁹ S.J. Sandage and P.J. Jankowski, "Spirituality, Social Justice, and Intercultural Competence: Mediator Effects of Differentiation of Self", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 37 (2013): 366-374.

⁴⁰ P.J. Jankowski, S.J. Sandage, and P.C. Hill, "Differentiation-based Models of Forgiveness, Mental Health and Social Justice Commitment: Mediators Effects for Differentiation of Self and Humility", *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8 (2013): 412-424.

DoS). Growth in mature alterity involves an integration of psychological and spiritual development.

Third, we recommend use of the IDI as an assessment tool in efforts to promote Christian spiritual formation and ministry, missionary, and therapeutic effectiveness. Many people receive diversity training without any assessment or individualized feedback. This contributes to situations where people over-estimate their IC or remain unclear about what they might work on for growth in IC. Moreover, diversity training efforts that do not use individual assessments risk a minimization-based or “one size fits all” approach to training which fails to tease out differing intercultural strengths and needed growth areas. This tends to disadvantage those at higher levels of IC who can also benefit from tailored training.

Fourth, as we have suggested throughout this chapter, healthy relational dynamics are important for containing crucible-like processes of transformation and growth. Since experiential learning is (a) key to growth in IC and SJC and (b) often anxiety-provoking and stressful, it is important to provide trainees with relationships that provide a balance of challenge and support, allowing processing of new experiences. Given the importance of relational factors for growth in mature alterity, we suggest forming relationships (e.g., small group, classroom, mentoring, etc.) that can provide sustained holding environments for processing diversity and justice conversations. Too many diversity training efforts are brief and do not make use of sustained relationships as a source of gain. This is probably problematic for dominant group members who find it easy to maintain the homeostasis of social segregation in their lives.

Fifth, Christian and other religious communities (e.g., congregations, schools) are often characterized by high levels of sociocultural homogeneity. This can require extra effort for some to depart from the familiarity of sociocultural and religious enclaves and gain diversity experience for learning. We emphasize the phrase “for learning”. Diversity encounters where the sole focus is “doing ministry” or “serving others” can become poorly differentiated “rescue projects”. Learning and authentic relating promote the humility necessary to be effective.

Finally, leaders in various systems often have disproportionate influence on the alterity ethos of that system. Leaders can set an example of differentiation and humility by seeking out mentors and peers who can foster their growth in mature alterity. They can help their systems consider the role of IC and SJC in their visions and missions and be accountable in those areas. They can pursue necessary resources, helping people in their system to grow. Conversely, leaders can commit to defense, reversal, or minimization, consciously or unconsciously blocking IC and SJC initiatives in their systems.

Given the array of research supporting a positive relationship between mature alterity and healthy relational spirituality, these practices may not only create healthier community and work settings, they may also foster spiritual growth. There is a need for more sophisticated research designs that could enable such causal inferences, and we hope researchers and practitioners will find ways to collaborate in developing and testing interventions to promote mature alterity.

