

Note: This interview was conducted by Jaleh Weber in 2010 and originally posted on Yahoo's Associated Content as article 5464686. The interview is no longer available on the internet.

## Religious or Spiritual Conflict: An Interview with Dr. Hoai-Thu Truong

By **Jaleh**

Religious or spiritual conflict can happen to anyone. The religious or spiritual conflict can happen within you or with another person. To help understand religious or spiritual conflict I have interviewed Dr. Hoai-Thu Truong.

### **Tell me a little bit about yourself.**

"My name is Hoai-Thu Truong. I am a clinical psychologist with a private practice in Palo Alto, California. I provide psychotherapy to adults from a depth-oriented (psychodynamic) perspective. In psychodynamic psychotherapy we pay attention to your thoughts, feelings, dreams, longings, what is on the surface and what lies below the surface of your consciousness. The people I work with come in for issues such as anxiety, depression, acculturation, meaning in life, personal growth, as well as religious and spiritual issues."

### **What type of religious issues do people usually seek a therapist for?**

"I'm not sure you can say that there is a typical religious issue that people seek help for from a therapist. Issues of religion or spirituality do come up for people who are seeing a therapist for something else, such as depression, anxiety or relationship difficulties, in as much as religion or spirituality are part of their life. However, when a person comes to see a therapist for a religious issue specifically, and chooses not to consult with a spiritual advisor, minister, rabbi or other spiritual or religious leader, there is usually some conflict or emotional distress going on. An example would be someone who is distressed as a result of questioning the religious upbringing they have received. Another example might be someone who is experiencing a lot of images or dreams with religious themes and they are disturbed by this experience and want some help sorting it out."

### **If they don't seek a therapist what type of impact will their conflict of religion have on a their overall life?**

"First of all I want to make it clear that there are many people who struggle with religious issues, who don't seek a mental health professional (and don't need to), and who are fine. Psychotherapy is not an answer to all questions nor is not appropriate for everything! That being said, the impact of not addressing a conflict of religion on one's overall life depends on the person and the situation. There may be little immediate impact. In a case where the struggle with religious issues is accompanied by distress, and the person is not addressing the struggle or the distress, the distress can lead to problems such as anxiety, depression, addiction, difficulties in relationships just as any other unaddressed conflict. There is also the possibility that the person copes with the conflict about religion by cutting off a part of himself or herself: "I won't think about it, I won't let myself have feelings around it; I just won't go there, ever." I believe that we humans have a spiritual/religious component that needs to be developed and nurtured so that we are fully whole. Sometimes we find that nourishment through organized religion or spiritual practices. It is a loss to cut off a part of one's personality and miss reaching one's full potential to be fully alive."

### **What do you say or have your client do to help them work through issues with religion?**

"As with each person who comes to see me with any issue, I don't say much at first but instead listen deeply to what he or she has to say. I listen both to what the person is saying and also to what he or she does not say, to the subtext, to what is in between the lines, in order to help them articulate what the difficulties or conflict are about. So in the case of someone struggling with the religion they grew up with, I help clarify whether the difficulties lie in the beliefs, the practices, the institution, the people in authority, or

the behaviors of the members of the religion, to name some possibilities. I help them sort what has been helpful, what has fed and nourished them and what hasn't. Is something missing? What are they longing for? If the struggle lies in the beliefs then we might discuss whether the person has a view of their religion based on what he or she learned as a child, which has not been updated to a more adult perspective. I help explore what feelings the person experiences as he or she describes the struggle. Disappointment? Anger? Sadness? Rage? As I listen to the person I wonder to myself whether this struggle with religion is part of the difficult process of increasing understanding. If strong feelings are present I wonder whether they are not only about the current situation but also about past struggles. An example would be where someone's feelings of rage and hurt at a religion are fueled by past hurts done to them by an authority figure that they had trusted. If any of these or similar questions seem relevant I bring them up for the person and I to explore together."

"If the conflict around religion is about them considering leaving their religion we would discuss what they imagine what it would be like. How would they feel? What would the consequences be, internally and externally? Is there a possibility of their being ostracized by the community? Would their family disown them? How would they cope with that? If they are considering joining another religious group or starting a different spiritual practice, what are they hoping for? How do they imagine it will be different? What are they longing for?"

"In summary, my role is to provide a safe place where the person can discuss and explore their difficulties without being judged or criticized, to help them sort their reactions and to assist them in figuring out what is right for them now. If warranted I suggest that they gather more information or consult with someone else, for example a religious leader or teacher."

#### **What advice would you like to leave for someone who is struggling with religion?**

"It is not an easy struggle. Stay with your struggle. Don't be too quick to dismiss the conflict. This may be an important piece of your personal growth, of your becoming a whole person. Take time to reflect over what is bothering you. Can you discuss your concerns with a trusted friend, religious leader or mentor? Is there a place where you can give voice to your concerns without the fear of being judged or criticized? If you find that the struggle is bringing up strong emotions consider seeking help from a religious leader familiar with psychological issues, or a therapist who is open to exploring religious and spiritual issues with you."

Thank you Dr. Hoai-Thu Truong for the interview. If you would like more information on Hoai-Thu Truong check out her website at [www.paloaltocounseling.com](http://www.paloaltocounseling.com).

#### **More resources**

- [www.paloaltocounseling.com](http://www.paloaltocounseling.com)