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SPIRITUAL BYPASSING: HOW TO DIAGNOSE AND ATTEND TO VARIOUS FORMS OF SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY IN PASTORAL WORK

A b s t r a c t. For centuries, spiritual growth has been one of the major topics in theology. In this context, spiritual guides have attempted to help people discern between true and false paths towards God. Today, we are again witnessing a growing interest in spirituality itself and in finding means to develop the spiritual potential in human life. Because of the increasing number of people venturing into more advanced spiritual practices, spiritual bypass is appearing more frequently. Recently, this topic has become a study subject of the psychology of spirituality and religion. This article presents major findings from this research and discusses their validity for pastoral work.

Keywords: spirituality; growth; maturity; spiritual bypass; defense mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

The spiritual quest has been part of human strivings for many centuries. Many individuals have dedicated their time and energy in order to pursue given spiritual goals. Their varied experiences illustrate how challenging a path this is and how many obstacles and pitfalls one has to face on this road. No wonder that, at times, people were not willing to take up the full burden of this journey. They tried to find shortcuts to avoid the necessary spiritual purification and human developmental tasks needed in order to get to their final destination.

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Unfortunately, it proved to be impossible. Despite their findings, the temptation to move faster on the spiritual path did not cease to seduce spiritual apprentices. The danger of misusing spirituality has even increased in the past decades because, statistically speaking, more and more people have turned to certain spiritual practices, although without the appropriate guidance that had normally been provided in the spiritual tradition of the Church.

With the development of psychology, we have learned about mechanisms that people use in order to avoid facing difficult realities and have named them “defense mechanisms.” Similarly, we can see spiritual bypass as a defense mechanism in the spiritual realm. Authentic spirituality is not just some esoteric knowledge “or a mellow hanging-out on some exalted plane of consciousness, not a bubble of immunity, but a vast fire of liberation, an exquisitely fitting crucible and sanctuary, providing both heat and light for the healing and awakening we need.”¹

The term “spiritual bypassing” was first coined by psychologist John Welwood in 1984 and denoted the use of spirituality to legitimize and to avoid dealing with psychological challenges such as painful feelings or unhealed wounds.² Welwood observed that many people tried to use their spiritual practices to suppress their personal needs and deny their identity. These people read many books on spirituality, engage in spiritual practices, followed spiritual teachers or retreats, and participated faithfully in Church gatherings. All these practices, however good in themselves, distracted them from nurturing their psychological needs as they believed that their spiritual work could one day resolve their psychological problems. Unfortunately, in this context, spiritual bypassing began to take the form of a fascinating pseudo-spiritual therapy, an endless participation in spiritual formation events that didn't really change anything in the participant's life. Today, spiritual bypassing seems to be even more widespread and is largely unconscious as it sometimes takes very subtle forms.

During a time of growing interest in forms of spirituality detached from their traditional origins, spiritual bypassing, without naming it as such, has flourished. Whereas true spirituality would have required a persistent life-long dedication and the presence of a qualified guide, for many free spirits of the mid-twentieth century, it seemed to have required too much long-term discipline. Spiritual bypass, in a general sense, is like “hitting the road, but only

¹ Cf. Robert A. Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects us from what Really Matters* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 3.

² Cf. John Welwood, “Principles of Inner Work: Psychological and Spiritual,” *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 16 (1984), 1: 63–73.

on the map” or in Christian terms “following the Lord without taking up the cross.” It has not allow the development of emotional depth and authenticity and, as a consequence, has kept searchers from acknowledging underlying psychological issues and understanding the origins of their troubles with a more open heart.³

1. CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTUALIZATIONS IN PSYCHOLOGY

There are different accents in the contemporary definitions of spiritual bypassing: using spirituality to avoid something, self-defense and justification, overall preference for or privileging of spiritual realities, spiritual development illusion. Spiritual bypass can be defined within four categories: (1) normal bypass, (2) states-driven bypass, (3) problematic bypass, and (4) narcissistic bypass. Normal bypass means that everyone uses some kind of bypass during their spiritual development.⁴ Another perspective on defining spiritual bypassing comes from Charles Whitfield and is related to persons working on their recovery from addictions as in the 12 step programs. Many of them try to avoid necessary psychological work by leaping directly into spirituality thereby shifting the focus of conversation onto spiritual concerns.⁵

Cashwell and colleagues first state that “spiritual bypass occurs when a person attempts to heal psychological wounds at the spiritual level only and avoids the important (albeit often difficult and painful) work at other levels, including the cognitive, physical, emotional, and interpersonal.”⁶ Subsequently, they proposed the following definition: “Spiritual bypass is a path or strategy that attempts to navigate the psyche away from the turmoil of distressful psychological work and unfinished business toward a place of harmonious inner peace.”⁷ According to Clark and colleagues spiritual bypass is “the use of one’s spirituality, spiritual beliefs, spiritual practices, and spiritual life to avoid experiencing the emotional

³ Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing*.

⁴ Cf. Gabriela Picciotto and Jesse Fox, “Exploring Experts’ Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass: A Conventional Content Analysis,” *Pastoral Psychology* 67 (2017), 1: 65–84.

⁵ Charles Whitfield, *My Recovery: A Personal Plan for Healing* (Boca Raton, FL: Health Communications, 2003).

⁶ Cf. Craig S. Cashwell, Paige B. Bentley, and J. Preston Yarborough, “The Only Way Out is Through: The Peril of Spiritual Bypass,” *Counseling and Values* 51 (2007), 2: 140.

⁷ Cf. Craig S. Cashwell, Philip B. Clarke, and Elizabeth G. Graves, “Step by Step: Avoiding Spiritual Bypass in 12-Step Work,” *Journal of Addictions & Offender Counseling* 30 (2009), 1: 38.

pain of working through psychological issues”.⁸ Fox and colleagues propose to define spiritual bypass as: “a defensive psychological posture cultivated by a tendency to privilege or exaggerate spiritual beliefs, emotions, or experiences over and against psychological needs creating a means of avoiding or bypassing difficult emotions or experiences.”⁹ Finally, Picciotto and Fox define spiritual bypassing as “the use of spiritual beliefs and practices to avoid dealing with psychological issues or trauma, relationship difficulties, emotional hassles, and developmental tasks.”¹⁰

In all these definitions, spiritual bypass is conceptualized as a way to use religion or spirituality to avoid the necessary work of healing one’s psychological wounds, which is a vital part of the healing process and may be missed because of using spiritual means instead of the healing tools of psychology.¹¹ Spiritual bypass also corrupts the true nature of spiritual practice and transforms it into another type of defense mechanism.¹²

2. PRELIMINARY PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

Based on their phenomenological study, Picciotto and colleagues present four causes of spiritual bypassing: to escape from reality or the ordinariness of life, to avoid pain, to cope with problematic social contexts, and finally, to avoid the negative influence of religious leaders and communities.¹³

Fortunately, people can become aware that they are using spiritual bypass, a significant step towards realizing the importance of this element in pastoral work. The discovery that they are not honestly using their faith practices usually happens in one of five ways: through living a deep feeling of existen-

⁸ Cf. Philip B. Clarke, Amanda L. Giordano, Craig S. Cashwell, and Todd F. Lewis, “The Straight Path to Healing: Using Motivational Interviewing to Address Spiritual Bypass,” *Journal of Counseling and Development* 91 (2013), 1: 87.

⁹ Cf. Jesse Fox, Craig S. Cashwell, and Gabriela Picciotto, “The Opiate of the Masses: Measuring Spiritual Bypass and Its Relationship to Spirituality, Religion, Mindfulness, Psychological Distress, and Personality,” *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 4 (2017), 4: 275.

¹⁰ Cf. Picciotto, and Fox, “Exploring Experts’ Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass,” 73.

¹¹ Cashwell, Clarke, and Graves, “Step by Step.”

¹² Cf. Iwona Niewiadomska, „Mechanizmy obronne,” in *Leksykon duchowości katolickiej*, ed. Marek Chmielewski (Kraków: Wydawnictwo „M”, 2002), 500-501.

¹³ Gabriela Picciotto, Jesse Fox, and Félix Neto, “A Phenomenology of Spiritual Bypass: Causes, Consequences, and Implications,” *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 20 (2018), 4: 333–354.

tial crisis, by feedback or help from others in their community who are more mature, by concrete experience of nonspiritual activity that makes an exaggerated focus on spiritual practices clearly visible and finally, through relational conflict or distress in a relationship.¹⁴

How do people deal with spiritual bypass? They usually apply strategies of self-help and personal development, but sometimes also ask for help from a spiritual mentor familiar with the mechanisms of psychological development. Those, who have recognized and worked through their use of spiritual bypass, report the following fruits: they have adopted more mature attitudes towards work, family, friendships, health, spirituality, and emotions; they have attained an integration of spiritual practices in view of their spiritual growth, they have become able to reach out to diverse spiritual practices, and they have chosen to have a more practical engagement in the real world and with real people following God's commandments¹⁵.

3. SYMPTOMS AND STRATEGIES

Spiritual bypass may take various forms and shapes. Below, we present some examples of them in a concise form.

3.1. Distorted Relationships

Generally speaking, the symptoms of spiritual bypass are isolation from other people, one's true self, and the world. This pertains to the difficulty of starting and developing relationships and the tendency to avoid contact with people considered unspiritual. The cause of this difficulty is either found in refusing to remain open to new relationships, or in idealizing the self as being above the basic human need for relationship thus seeking to engage in a relationship only with an ideal spiritual partner.¹⁶

3.2. Anger-Phobia and Dissociation

While using spiritual bypass, people demonstrate their propensity to avoid any disappointment. They either refuse to confront others or consider themselves too spiritual to become upset or angry. There is also the fear of confrontation be-

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem; Picciotto, and Fox, "Exploring Experts' Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass," 65–84.

cause the person does not want to disappoint others and is afraid to challenge or to disagree. The consequence of this approach is emotional dissociation, anger-phobia, which means the disconnection of the person from their emotional life;¹⁷ this leads to significant difficulty getting in touch with and expressing their emotions. There is also intellectual dissociation, where the person shifts their focus from emotions to facts and logic. Finally, there is a lack of grounding in-the-body experience as the person loses intimacy with their own body, and disdains its physicality.¹⁸ Repressed feelings are not annihilated when one becomes more spiritual. The opposite may actually be true. These feelings will find ways to reveal themselves.¹⁹ A person who avoids expressing aggression makes spirituality a “love-only zone,” where rage, greed, envy, and hatred apparently do not exist. They also believe that life is all about love, peace, and beneficence. What is unpleasant for them receives a label of illusion or “ego.”²⁰ This produces so-called “authoritarian spirituality.”²¹

3.3. Spiritual Narcissism

One of the most visible symptoms of spiritual bypassing are narcissism and grandiosity in the spiritual domain. Many of those affected by these symptoms present themselves as spiritually superior to others and holders of all the answers since they perceive themselves as the only ones who see beyond.²² On the other hand, some people tend to hold beliefs that support a low self-esteem, which can be linked to their imagining God as judgmental and -vengeful.²³

3.4. Relying on a Spiritual Leader

Another negative fruit of spiritual bypass may be a blind belief in a charismatic guru or the blind following of a charismatic, spiritual leader.²⁴ Spiritual bypass can also be played in the relationship between spiritual master and pupil.

¹⁷ See also: Adam Rybicki, *Uzdrawiająca moc Maryi* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo „M”, 2012).

¹⁸ Picciotto, and Fox, “Exploring Experts’ Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass;” Picciotto, Fox, and Neto, “A Phenomenology of Spiritual Bypass.”

¹⁹ Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing*.

²⁰ Lisa M. Cataldo, “Can There Be a Psychoanalytic Spirituality? A Response to Kenneth Porter.” *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* 10 (2013), 2: 270–784.

²¹ Anselm Grün, *O duchowości inaczej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 1996).

²² Picciotto, and Fox, “Exploring Experts’ Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass;” Picciotto, Fox, and Neto, “A Phenomenology of Spiritual Bypass.”

²³ Cashwell, Clarke, and Graves, “Step by Step.”

²⁴ Picciotto, and Fox, “Exploring Experts’ Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass;” Picciotto, Fox, and Neto, “A Phenomenology of Spiritual Bypass.”

This relationship may take up the characteristics of codependency, child-parent transference or even cultism.²⁵ Such relationships are the antithesis of authentic spirituality. Unfortunately, holding leadership positions in communities often use the phraseology of spiritual enlightenment and the glory of God to mask their methods of seducing others.²⁶ Yet, the most important role of a spiritual guide is to help the person navigate through their spiritual crises.²⁷

3.5. Blind Compassion

Spiritual bypass can also take up the form of blind compassion, understood as exaggerated tolerance, leading people to be overly permissive.²⁸ This distorts the very noble attitude of compassion into some imitation of it such as pity understood as a confrontation-phobic attempt at caring and being nice at any cost. Spiritual bypass is also the opposite of self-transcendence as it leads to dissociation from certain parts of being human. True transcendence keeps all of them unified but also remains free from them. One needs to be exposed to the broken aspects of one's self in order to reconcile and integrate them with courage and compassion into one's spiritual core.²⁹ Spiritual bypass can reveal itself as compulsive goodness expressed in chronic caring for others. This can be the sign of a low sense of self-worth and masks a desire to be accepted by others.³⁰ These persons literally become obsessed with helping others.³¹

3.6. Avoiding Responsibilities

One of the ways spiritual bypass manifests itself is through the abdication of personal responsibility.³² Those affected by it tend to avoid any life responsibilities, for example, by refusing to engage in professional careers or long-term

²⁵ Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing*.

²⁶ James L. Griffith, Melissa Griffith, *Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003).

²⁷ Marek Chmielewski, *Wielka księga duchowości katolickiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo AA, 2015).

²⁸ Picciotto, and Fox, "Exploring Experts' Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass."

²⁹ Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing*.

³⁰ Cf. Craig S. Cashwell, "Spirituality and wellness," in *Counseling for Wellness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, ed. Jane E. Myers, Thomas J. Sweeney (Washington, DC: American Counseling Association, 2005), 197–206.

³¹ Cf. Cashwell, Clarke, and Graves, "Step by Step."

³² Craig S. Cashwell, Harriet L. Glossoff, and Chereé Hammond, "Spiritual Bypass: A Preliminary Investigation," *Counseling and Values* 54 (2010), 2: 162–174.

financial commitments.³³ Spiritual bypass shows itself in not wanting to take responsibility so one does not need to get involved emotionally in problems. It is not a healthy detachment but rather a misplaced separation.³⁴ One cannot use spirituality in order to avoid the world and its problems. Authentic spirituality should rather deepen one's compassion and boost one's service to the world.³⁵

3.7. Exaggerated Optimism

There is also overstated optimism with an exaggerated and unrealistic focus on the bright side of problems as well as the refusal to acknowledge darker parts of one's personality or personal history. People are often advised to focus on the positive side of life or events. This helps them avoid dealing with the most important life challenge which is their core pain.³⁶ The unrealistic emphasis on the positive side of situations is often a side product of anger-phobia, or the inability to deal with their negative emotions.³⁷

3.8. Denying our Sinfulness

Healthy spirituality involves awareness and acceptance of present moment circumstances. People involved in spiritual bypassing tend to deny at least some aspects of this existence.³⁸ One of these aspects is one's propensity to evil. This results in a superficial acceptance or even non-acceptance of the negative side of being human.³⁹ Spiritual bypass can also be called "false transcendence," meaning a denial of one's sinfulness which results in developing a prideful spiritual persona.⁴⁰ In the Christian tradition, examining one's conscience as well as confessing one's sins and converting is a permanent practice. Although confession is the foundation of any spiritual growth,

³³ Picciotto, and Fox, "Exploring Experts' Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass;" Picciotto, Fox, and Neto, "A Phenomenology of Spiritual Bypass."

³⁴ Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing*.

³⁵ Gerlad G. May, *Will and Spirit. A Contemplative Psychology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987).

³⁶ Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing*.

³⁷ Picciotto, and Fox, "Exploring Experts Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass."

³⁸ Cashwell, Glosoff, and Hammond, "Spiritual Bypass: A Preliminary Investigation."

³⁹ Picciotto, and Fox, "Exploring Experts' Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass."

⁴⁰ Craig S. Cashwell, Jane E. Myers, and W. Matthew Shurts, "Using the Developmental Counseling and Therapy Model to Work With a Client in Spiritual Bypass: Some Preliminary Considerations," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 82 (2004), 4: 403–409.

today it is extremely difficult for some people to raise the confession of sins to the sacramental level.⁴¹

3.9. Misuse of Meditation or Prayer

Meditation and prayer should not be used as an escape, but rather practiced as an aid to enter into the mystery of one's life with God. Meditation does not serve to let one's thoughts and emotions fly away to some ethereal place and detach from reality. On the contrary, it should bring us into the very heart of our existence and our following of God's paths. Meditation is not something to be lived as a distant spectator of the universe. It is rather the transforming realization of our dependance on God whom we are searching for.⁴²

3.10. Magical Thinking

Spiritual bypass leads to magical thinking: a mixture of superstition, perception of illusory connections and causations, wishful thinking, as well as a relying on Divine intervention instead of taking personal action.⁴³ People who use spiritual bypass tend to overstate the presence of providential events and supernatural connections in everyday life in order to avoid real life challenges.⁴⁴ The process of reducing spirituality to magic has its own dynamics. This phenomenon is characterized by a specific language (e.g., "scientific," "energy") and is strongly supported by pop-culture.⁴⁵

4. POSSIBLE CAUSES

Fox and colleagues suggest that spiritual bypass originates from an attitude that hierarchically privileges supernatural action over human obligations, and that through this process, healthy spirituality is bent toward defensive ways of facing life challenging experiences and serves to alleviate pain and establish security rather than human and spiritual growth.⁴⁶

⁴¹ George Weigel, *Katolicyzm ewangeliczny* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo „M”, 2014).

⁴² James Finley, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2005); Stanisław T. Zarzycki, "Medytacja," in *Leksykon duchowości katolickiej*, 515.

⁴³ Picciotto, and Fox, "Exploring Experts' Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass."

⁴⁴ Jerome Bernstein, *Living in the Borderland* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁴⁵ Antoni Posacki, *Ezoteryzm i okultyzm — formy dawne i nowe* (Radom: Polskie Wydawnictwo Encyklopedyczne, 2009).

⁴⁶ Cf. Fox, Cashwell, and Picciotto, "The Opiate of the Masses."

Among possible causes of spiritual bypass, one can name someone's low tolerance to physical and spiritual pain. Another possible cause might be a low awareness of possible misuse of spirituality among spiritual leaders or communities. Moreover, simply being too occupied with so-called spiritual matters will not leave much time for human growth and can foster fanaticism rather than spiritual maturity.⁴⁷ Thus, living in an environment that does not encourage personal maturation can sabotage any true spiritual development.⁴⁸

Pargament and colleagues came up with problem-solving-styles that can help us understand the causes of spiritual bypass. Among these styles of problem-solving, we find self-directing and deferring.⁴⁹ Spiritual bypass resembles deferring, or letting go of personal responsibility and expecting God to take care of the problem. The deferring problem-solving style jeopardizes personal responsibility and prevents a person from taking an active role in confronting their problems.⁵⁰

5. NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

There are many consequences to spiritual bypass. First, there is a general sense of stagnation in personal development resulting from an exaggerated focus on spirituality.⁵¹ This is the case of a person who becomes and remains spiritually paralyzed and feels lost in the spiritual domain. Instead of growing spiritually, these persons end up going in circles and remain immature in terms of their spiritual life and lack the capacity for self-awareness. They stay spiritually blind and lose contact with their core self. It also means that they do not grow cognitively and stay trapped in the childish illusions of magical thinking.⁵² Fox and colleagues summarize:

Possible negative consequences of spiritual bypass include the need to control others and self, dichotomous thinking, shame, spiritual obsession, fear, emotional

⁴⁷ Krzysztof Grzywocz, *Patologia duchowości* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2020).

⁴⁸ Picciotto, and Fox, "Exploring Experts' Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass."

⁴⁹ Cf. Kenneth I. Pargament, Joseph Kennell, William Hathaway, Nancy Grevengoed, Jon Newman, and Wendy Jones, "Religion and the Problem-Solving Process: Three Styles of Coping," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 27 (1988), 1: 90–104.

⁵⁰ Cf. Fox, Cashwell, and Picciotto, "The Opiate of the Masses."

⁵¹ Picciotto, Fox, and Neto, "A Phenomenology of Spiritual Bypass."

⁵² Picciotto, and Fox, "Exploring Experts' Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass."

confusion, addiction, high tolerance for inappropriate behavior, codependence, pain, compulsive goodness, narcissism or ego inflation, obsession or addiction, blind belief in charismatic teachers, spiritual materialism (use of spiritual practice for material gain), developmental arrest, and abdication of personal responsibility.⁵³

Spiritual bypass distorts long-term spiritual growth because it renders the process of spiritual development incomplete. Unresolved psychological problems can result in spiritual distress as well as in clinically significant religious and spiritual impairment.⁵⁴ There are also some negative consequences of spiritual bypass that have social repercussions. Spiritual bypass can cause unnecessary suffering for others. People using spiritual bypass tend not to take appropriate care of their relationships and families, because they are devoting the majority of their time to spiritual practices. They also have difficulty connecting with others and possibly lack empathy. On the other hand, some people or institutions take advantage of the vulnerability and indecisiveness of people using spiritual bypass in order to sell services that often exacerbate their use of spiritual bypass.⁵⁵

When spiritual bypass is used as an avoidance strategy, people discover that the peace they seek eludes them. Their psychological turmoil remains unresolved and is only hidden below the conscious surface. Keeping the turmoil there requires additional energy. It is extremely difficult to deny challenging feelings and at the same time keep one's behaviors in line with God's commandments. Such persons are obliged to constantly suppress their reflexive reactions in order to appear to themselves and to others as good or spiritual individuals.⁵⁶ That is why F. Sheen proposes the term "inner nakedness" consisting not only in contact with oneself, but even more in surrendering all one's weaknesses to a merciful God.⁵⁷

6. SUGGESTIONS FOR PASTORAL WORK

Since encouraging spiritual growth through the participation in various formation programs and silent retreats has become an essential part of the

⁵³ Cf. Fox, Cashwell, and Picciotto, "The Opiate of the Masses," 275.

⁵⁴ Cf. Peter C. Hill, and Marcus K. Kilian, "Assessing Clinically Significant Religious Impairment in Clients: Applications from Measures in the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 6 (2003), 2: 149–160.

⁵⁵ Picciotto, and Fox, "Exploring Experts' Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass."

⁵⁶ Cashwell, Clarke, and Graves, "Step by Step."

⁵⁷ Fulton J. Sheen, *Droga do pokoju serca* (Częstochowa: Edycja Świętego Pawła, 2011).

contemporary style of living one's faith, it is important for spiritual directors to be able to discover and treat spiritual bypass. They have to be attentive not to encourage it by putting too much accent on supernatural phenomena. They rather need to help people to integrate their spiritual quest with work at the emotional, cognitive, physical, and relational levels.⁵⁸

6.1. Spiritual Bypass in View of Spiritual Development

We can describe the person in spiritual bypass as someone in a state of developmental arrest. Such a person can score high on paper-and-pencil measurements of spirituality and can give a misleading preliminary impression of living a strong and healthy spiritual life.⁵⁹ However, under certain circumstances, spiritual bypass may lead to a healthy spirituality and personal growth as it is considered to be a common experience among persons pursuing a spiritual journey.⁶⁰ Some authors like Forman⁶¹ and Masters⁶² have considered spiritual bypass as a common stage for those who pursue spiritual paths. In some cases, spiritual bypass seems to be inevitable as a natural stage of spiritual development but one needs to outgrow it as spirituality is not a way of escaping reality but rather a point of arrival.

Probably everyone who embraces a spiritual journey will at some point use some form of spiritual bypass. It can also be useful as a short-term coping strategy when it comes to dealing with high stress or difficult situations for a relatively short period of time.⁶³ But this is not an ideal situation. Spiritual bypass has to be overcome. When people develop an authentic spirituality, they will come to recognize any avoidance strategy; under these circumstances, spiritual bypass does not negate their spiritual growth.⁶⁴ As Masters summarizes: "Spirituality is an embracing and illumination of life's difficulties."⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, "The Only Way Out is Through."

⁵⁹ Cashwell, Glossoff, and Hammond, "Spiritual Bypass: A Preliminary Investigation."

⁶⁰ Cashwell, Myers, and Shurts, "Using the Developmental Counseling and Therapy Model to Work with a Client in Spiritual Bypass."

⁶¹ Mark Forman, *A Guide to Integral Psychotherapy: Complexity, Spirituality, and Integration in Practice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

⁶² Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing*.

⁶³ Picciotto, and Fox, "Exploring Experts Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass."

⁶⁴ Fox, Cashwell, and Picciotto, "The Opiate of the Masses."

⁶⁵ Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing*, 196.

6.2. General and Specific Rules for Effective Help

There are already some general rules for treatment of spiritual bypass. First, the person's autonomy must be developed by supporting their capacity to gain control over their life. Believers should try to attain an existential acceptance of the presence of suffering in their life and develop courage to face life challenges. Also, they are invited to learn to be sensitive and aware of the purpose that spiritual bypass is serving in their life. Hopefully, there should be an appropriate level of empathy on the part of pastoral agents so that believers can be helped to connect to their self using various time proven techniques developed to that effect. The therapist has to be aware that spiritual bypass does not always need to be treated, because it can also be a natural stage of spiritual development.⁶⁶

6.3. Warnings

The fact that pastoral work can be jeopardized by spiritual bypass makes it crucial for pastoral agents to get to know how to identify and intervene in such cases. While treating spiritual bypass, we have to always be aware that it can be a defense mechanism or a coping strategy that plays a critical and sometimes crucial role in people's lives, especially when they are faced with surviving difficult circumstances. There is no doubt that people defend these mechanisms when they are threatened.⁶⁷ Thus, when confronting spiritual bypass, it is important to be aware of this possibility since many people use defense mechanisms and coping strategies unconsciously to avoid suffering, and most of them will show some resistance and ambivalence while addressing this problem. When supporting believers, we need to approach this issue with great respect using motivation rather than direct confrontation; a confrontational stance will almost certainly be ineffective and may give rise to ambivalence or resistance. While gently inviting a person to change, we need to acknowledge that spiritual bypass has helped the person to cope with life's difficulties.⁶⁸

Dealing with spiritual bypass means seeing believers as lacking flexibility in the way they are searching for a solution to their problems. In the first case, for instance, the spiritual director invites the penitent to change their image of God and to move from *God as deliverer* to *God who allows difficulties* or to change their spiritual practices such as moving from *prayer that*

⁶⁶ Picciotto, and Fox, "Exploring Experts' Perspectives on Spiritual Bypass."

⁶⁷ Cashwell, Clarke, and Graves, "Step by Step."

⁶⁸ Fox, Cashwell, and Picciotto, "The Opiate of the Masses."

is always effective for the righteous to a prayer that does not always bring me what I want. In the second case, by using direct confrontation, the spiritual director may risk alienating the penitent through exaggerated demands.⁶⁹

CONCLUSIONS

Although we are slowly becoming aware of the mechanism of spiritual bypassing and its role in spirituality, more research is needed to deepen our understanding of it. One of the unanswered questions is how spiritual bypass relates to help-seeking attitudes. There are already some models helping us to identify when spirituality makes psychological problems worse rather than helps heal⁷⁰ as well as possible ways of preventing spiritual bypass: psychological support, psycho-spiritual education, spiritual accompaniment integrating psychological and spiritual issues, and finally, being a part of a faith community aware of the pitfalls of spiritual bypass.⁷¹

From the existential point of view, spiritual bypass can be seen as a form of inauthentic existence as it presents a descent into inauthenticity or alienation. One of the major issues raised by existentialists is the tendency to avoid any responsibility and as a consequence renounce one's freedom. As Masters⁷² pointed out, one of the major issues for many people is avoiding any suffering. In an existential perspective not being able to face unavoidable suffering and fear of death is one of most dehumanizing attitudes of one's life and even more so in the life of a believer.⁷³

As a final note, one has to admit that empirical research on spiritual bypass remains in its infancy. In the last few decades, as with other issues involving psychology and spirituality, spiritual bypassing has gained substantial interest. Much remains to be explored, but the beginnings are very pro-

⁶⁹ Jesse Fox, Gabriela Picciotto, Craig S. Cashwell, Everett L. Worthington, Melissa J. Basso, Sarah Brow Corrigan, Loren Toussaint, and Melissa Zeligman, "Religious Commitment, Spirituality, and Attitudes Toward God as Related to Psychological and Medical Help-Seeking: The Role of Spiritual Bypass," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 7 (2020), 7: 178–196.

⁷⁰ Ibidem.

⁷¹ Picciotto, Fox, and Neto, "A Phenomenology of Spiritual Bypass."

⁷² Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing*.

⁷³ Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

mising and the topic itself is extremely interesting and significant for the future evolution of pastoral work.

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DUCHOWE OBEJŚCIE:
JAK DIAGNOZOWAĆ I UCZESTNICZYĆ W RÓŻNYCH FORMACH
NIEDOJRZAŁOŚCI DUCHOWEJ W PRACY DUSZPASTERSKIEJ

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Od wieków rozwój duchowy jest jednym z głównych tematów teologii. W tym kontekście przewodnicy duchowi pomagali ludziom dostrzegać fałszywe drogi do Boga, takie jak unikanie koniecznego oczyszczenia intencji czy konieczność zmiany nawyków. Dziś jesteśmy świadkami rosnącego zainteresowania duchowością czy też rozwijania potencjału duchowego w życiu człowieka. Coraz większa liczba osób oddająca się bardziej zaawansowanym praktykom duchowym przekłada się na rosnącą możliwość obierania duchowych dróg na skróty. Ostatnio ten temat stał się również przedmiotem zainteresowania psychologii religii i duchowości. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia główne wnioski z badań prowadzonych w zakresie tych nauk i omawia ich znaczenie dla pracy duszpasterskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: duchowość; wzrost; dojrzałość; obejście duchowe; mechanizmy obronne.