

Beyond Psychotherapy

IFS, SPIRITUALITY, AND PEACE

IFS applications have been steadily infused across many disciplines outside the realm of psychotherapy over the last several years. We've seen them in the business, law, and coaching practices; in the domain of prisons and schools; and to help resolve conflict in the Middle East. In all cases, the central concepts of IFS appear to bring meaning and value to many individuals and groups in small and large ways. Within diverse topics and uses of IFS, one theme is often present, but not always spoken about—spirituality. No matter where the Model is used, many are deeply touched by the spiritual nature of this work.

In past editions of OUTLOOK, we have featured many areas where others are using IFS. Here we introduce three members of our community who have used IFS directly in their daily work: a Christian minister, a Zen Buddhist priest, and a Christian Orthodox priest. OUTLOOK asked for their thoughts on how divided world religions are and how they see the potential impact of IFS on bridging different spiritual beliefs and on global peace.

It is our pleasure to introduce you to these three gentlemen, who have been deeply affecting the lives of countless members of their communities for several decades, and their views on peace.



“Those who are at the core of their religion are closer to those who are at the core of other religions than those who are at the fringes of their own religion. Faithful Muslims are closer to faithful Christians than they are to ISIS members. Faithful Christians are closer to faithful Jews than they are to K.K.K. members. The first-hand experience of God is similar for all human beings and the theology/beliefs about God are secondary. This is why IFS could be a powerful force for world peace, because it nurtures the experience of Self, i.e., the image of God, and thus, connects all religions through their primary feeling and resulting wisdom.”

—Rev. Denny Moon

Rev. Moon, who took his IFS Level One in 2015, has been a minister at United Church of Christ in Granby, Connecticut for 11 years. During L1, he was able to befriend and see his inner critic as an ally, and with whom he still converses in his daily mediation, rather than an enemy. “Continuing my IFS therapy has

“The first-hand experience of God is similar for all human beings and the theology/beliefs about God are secondary.”

made me less reactive to the criticism I receive from others and has increased my ease in telling people, ‘I don’t know the answer to that,’ which formerly felt threatening to parts of me,” he shares. It is in having close relationships with his own parts, that he incorporates the language and lens of IFS within all aspects of his work.

His written liturgy in worship speaks directly of parts in their weekly confession reading about sin. In Christianity, sin is seen as a break in relationship with our higher selves, others, or God. Thus, IFS fosters the restoration of this relationship. A poignant example of one of his liturgies:



UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

We confess that we are often conflicted. A part of us makes a promise but another part is afraid to keep it. A part of us wants to accept all people and another part thinks it has to protect us by rejecting others. A part of us wants to be humble but another part fears that we really have to look better than others in order to be acceptable. Forgive us, for all parts of us are intending good.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

One: *When we get to know our different parts, we come to see each and every one of them wants the best for us and others.*

All: *When they feel accepted by us, they begin to be allies with our soul, our higher self, and we begin to live in a measure of peace. Amen.*

In his sermons, after reading scripture, he uses analogies and stories with the framework of IFS to assist members of his congregation to befriend, understand, and speak for, rather than from, parts. During his monthly Leadership Team meetings, members share their vulnerable “weekly ups and downs” by reflecting upon and speaking for their different parts. Even his pastoral associates are coming on board. About having discovered her Lawyer Part, one pastoral associate remarked, “It is very helpful to know it’s just a part me and not all of me. I’m getting better at calling it forth in the right situations, but asking it to step aside in others.” Likewise, within his pastoral care and counseling, his parishioners report great relief in unblending from a part and seeing their positive intention. Rev. Moon may be reached at denny@southchurch.necoxmail.com.



“If we are all in this deep process together, then our differences become beautiful ornaments of the divine rather than barriers to love.”

“There seems to be a universal yearning to come into some relationship with the inconceivable mystery of it all. I see IFS as a form of deep inquiry into the nature of Self, other and community, that opens the gates of healing and peace. However, people have to be willing to look closely and appreciate the parts of them who fearfully attach to beliefs in order to cling to the false notions of safety or an ultimate protector. It is this clinging that disrupts peace and divides. If I am right and you are wrong, then ruptures can happen. If we are all in this deep process together, then our differences become beautiful ornaments of the divine rather than barriers to love. Why do we indulge in a list of habits that inevitably leads to conflict? How do we stay caught by parts and lose our center in Self? We hate being vulnerable, frightened, sad, frustrated, and ashamed. But the truth is, none of these conditions are stable. None of these shifting realities are ultimately who we are. No matter what we do, things will change, often in directions we don't like. And, no matter how hard we work to improve ourselves we will always be human - messy and complex. IFS provides a map for a real human life that is not led by attachments, adherence, fixations, addictions, obsessions, and holding firmly to old beliefs and habits.”

—Flint Sparks, PhD

Flint Sparks, PhD is a former therapist and Clinical Psychologist as well as an ordained Zen Buddhist priest. He is a resident teacher at Appamada, a Center for Contemporary Zen Practice and Inquiry in Austin, Texas. He has been using IFS with both clients and students as a Zen teacher for over twenty years. In his community's Precepts Program, a year-long study program which focuses on the moral and ethical guidelines of Buddhism, in Practice Discussion Groups, which meet weekly in to deepen participants' spiritual inquiry and practice, and in larger weekly public Inquiry groups, Flint integrates the principles of the IFS Model with Zen practice.

His students find IFS very accessible to follow because they recognize the qualities of Self to be in accordance with the ideal of maturity and wakefulness. In each group setting, he assists students in understanding the bodhisattva ideal as the embodiment of Self (bodhisattva is a person who, out of compassion, delays reaching nirvana in order to save suffering beings). As students move through their inquiry process, some identify parts that have been barriers to awakening or that surface in meditation practice that have bound-up spiritual energy.

He describes, “They can learn to view their parts as inner beings who suffer unnecessarily. Self is the enactment of an inner-bodhisattva committed to freeing parts from this unnecessary suffering (unburdening). Meditation and the cultivation of a mindful witnessing function supports a stepping back and turning toward parts with all the qualities of Self energy (unblending).” Because opening to Self-energy is a goal, group members hold Self-energy for one another, similar to IFS workshops and trainings, which deepens their work individually and collectively. One student explains, “Years of Zen training had helped me learn to sit with readiness to meet whatever arises. The IFS process helped support my natural intuition, released the inherent wisdom of the parts that were met, and allowed the fixations and beliefs to be released and transformed.” Flint may be reached at flint@flintsparks.org.

“Fear is the reason for world division. The Internet has opened new doors making world religions and wisdom traditions accessible at the touch of a button. Walls are coming down. People are searching and discovering new and old paths to self-discovery in places that they did not expect. The world people lived in no longer exists—it is porous and constantly changing and people are reacting with fundamentalism and fanaticism as a protection against the perceived threats to the status quo. The situation appears to be worsening so the reaction is becoming more extreme. With wisdom literature easily available, many people are leaving churches for meditation halls and yoga, etc. because they find something that helps them connect with God, ameliorate their suffering, and bring inner peace. In my church and in Christianity in general, the exit is troubling to many. My message is they may well be leaving for good reasons and demonizing them is counter-productive. IFS can help us understand the basis of dualistic divisiveness because it speaks of what I see as the heart of religion: the presence



of the image of God in every human being. It transcends religious boundaries. I believe helping people connect with their True Self and notice and heal their extreme parts will bring us all closer together.”

—Very Rev. Antony Hughes

Very Rev. Antony Hughes has been an Orthodox priest at St. Mary’s Orthodox Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts for the past 25 years. Upon completing his IFS Level One three years ago, he told his cohorts, “What I was supposed to have gotten out of church, is what IFS provides – a tool for spiritual growth, something pragmatic to enter into interior growth.” Because IFS deeply resonated with him, Father Antony, a self-reported IFS-evangelist, returned to his congregation and began using it within nearly every aspect of his ministry. He has even inspired four seminarians and four parishioners to take the IFS training. “IFS is transformative and, like prayer,

meditation, and sacramental living, informs my daily life. I see my own parts and help others to recognize theirs.”

Though trained in Orthodox Christianity which he believes when it is misinterpreted can be narrow-minded, he works comfortably with Buddhists, Jews, and people of any religious tradition, reassuring through his own parts work his once-fearful parts about others. It is in having conscious, open dialogue, framed with parts language, that internal and external peace can be found, he asserts. “I don’t think you can accomplish that without Self-energy. Self-energy is so powerful,” says Fr. Antony.

He sees more commonalities than differences now, such as the parallels between Christ Consciousness and Buddha Nature. Uniting differences, Fr. Antony often shares a favorite quote by Jean Claude Barreau, “Whose fault is it that so many have to resort to Tao or Zen in order to discover truths which were actually part of the Christian heritage from the beginning?” Fr. Antony earnestly enjoys helping people find for themselves a spirituality that works and is not afraid of where that path may lead them. In this work, he finds IFS to be uniquely helpful because, he says, “that which is the heart of religion is what we are talking about in IFS.”

For the past ten years, Fr. Antony has visited men in prison as part of his pastoral ministry. In his groups, he provides an IFS perspective, Christianity reinterpreted in the light of the mystical approach at the center of Orthodox Christianity, Buddhist psychology, and meditation to help these men come to terms with where they are, what they’ve done, and with reintegration once they prepare to leave. He says the results of using IFS in his work are astonishing and nothing short of miraculous. One inmate, in particular, brought Father to tears when one day the inmate told him, “I realized something really important: the prison is in my mind.” Fr. Antony may be reached at frawhj@gmail.com.

[Considerable efforts were made to find a variety of religions to be represented. Should you know of any IFS-trained religious leaders who may be interested in sharing their perspectives with the community, please contact Michelle Glass at OUTLOOK@FoundationIFS.org.]

“I believe helping people connect with their True Self and notice and heal their extreme parts will bring us all closer together.”