

An Unknown, Unnamable Journey: Family Therapists in Complex Conversations as Muslim and Sikh Immigrants



Kiran Arora and Saliha Bava

Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other. (Bakhtin, 1981, Discourses in Poetry and Discourses in the Novel).

In the summer of 2004, in a conversation with my mother when I, Saliha, was visiting with my family in India, after having lived in the United States of America for nine years, I concluded that though she and I share the values of compassion, kindness, and love toward others, they stem from different moralities—a religious morality governs my mother while I draw on a humanistic morality. There is a difference in sensibility, and experientially the distinction feels vast even though the end result of an interaction might be similar. I think the distinction is illustrative of how we each negotiate our relationship to religion. As did I in my way, in their own way my parents negotiated their relationship to the practice of religion throughout their life. Not so much about their belief in God, but in the practice of religion. Thus, intersectionality of our identities was not lost on me even at a young age. We were raised to be religious and secular. Have faith and to be inclusive. Believe in Islam and celebrate other religious identities (Bava, 2016).

The spiritual and political aspects of Sikhism have always been woven together for me, Kiran. My father's message to me was to *have no fear*, also known as the concept of *Nirbhau*. He embodied the Sikh principle never to cower to oppression,

Author contributed equally with all other contributors. Kiran Arora and Saliha Bava

K. Arora
Long Island University, Brooklyn, NY, USA
e-mail: kiran.arora@liu.edu

S. Bava (✉)
Marriage and Family Therapy Program, Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, NY, USA
Houston Galveston Institute, Houston, TX, USA
Taos Institute, Chagrin Falls, OH, USA

but to stand up to it, confront it, and to defend others who may not be able to. My mother expressed the spiritual realm of Sikhism, emphasizing a focused intent on prayer to calm the mind. She firmly believed that having a disciplined practice of prayer would center and heal me. Sikhism is firmly rooted in the belief that everything happens according to God's will. The focus of the prayer was to have the strength to accept God's will in its entirety. My parents helped me internalize the Sikh concept of *Miri Piri*, or the *temporal and spiritual components* of life. These are the messages that were taught to me during my own moments of sadness and despair and help anchor my spiritual life.

In writing together, we have wrestled with questions such as, *how do we, people of marginalized religious faiths navigate the current cultural context in Northern America and how are our relational processes informing our therapeutic practices and in turn shaping our identities?* In this paper, as we converse about our journey of religious identity, we reflect on context, community, self, and mental health. We also reflect on how our identities are shaped by the intersecting discourses we navigate, and on sense making as an ongoing constitutive process of being responsive to self, other, and community. Further, we share with you practice implications derived from our personal, spiritual, and therapeutic reflections. We conclude with case examples that highlight these implications in teaching and clinical settings.

Our Faith Identities in Conversation: Our Process of Writing

This chapter is written alongside multiple conversations we have with one another. Through this journey, we have discovered, uncovered, challenged, and embraced our notions of religion and spirituality. New questions emerged as we continued to engage in the active processes of listening and understanding. As we shared our experiences, we found ourselves talking in terms of insider and outsider discourses of our faith communities. Insider discourses are stories of faith that we grew up with along with stories from other believers within the faith community. And outsider discourses are how people from outside of the faith speak about our respective faith; they can be media, people of other faith, and/or nonbelievers. We have questioned how to write without negotiating with the outside and inside discourses on our specific faiths. The reader will inevitably make meaning of our writing through dominant discourses on Islam and Sikhism, taken for granted ideas that have added to the landscape of meaning of these two faiths. As writers and practitioners of the faiths, we too have had to deconstruct and question these powerful discourses in an effort to get to the sense of our experiences. Our hope is to make adequate space for our realities, our stories, our interpretations, and to have them stand on their own without apology.

We write not only in first-person narrative but also to share what are marginalized faith narratives that are often obscured in the current context of creating homogeneous narratives of faith communities. Our stories are not intended to be reflective, but rather constitutive. How might we ask you to be open to the performative quality of your reading by which our stories are performed and remade in your internal

discourse? How might we be present to this as an isomorphic process both in the clinical and social realms?

Location of Self

I, Kiran, am a South Asian, Sikh, Canadian woman living in the United States. My relationship to my faith has been a mostly private affair and I have come to believe that God is not limited to my understanding and will be mostly unknowable through my lifetime. I am committed to the journey of deep reflection and transformation of self that requires an ongoing engagement with my spiritual life. My parents were born in India and migrated to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s. Their experiences with internal religious conflict and war in India, along with the country's poor human rights record, forced them to immigrate to Canada. Stronger economic and social opportunities were a pull in their migration. Despite Canada being a more stable democracy where religious freedoms and human rights are more likely to be respected, my family has not been free of discrimination due to race, religion, and gender. My own life has been marked with incidents of discrimination that I continue to comprehend and heal from. My migration to the United States follows my parents' legacy of pursuing a greater dream, greater stability, and healing from wounds that seem to be bound to time and location.

I, Saliha, locate myself in relationship to religion and spirituality, or for that matter to any other social identity, as having a hyperlinked identity (Bava, 2016). Such a dynamic identity is a contextually situated way of defining oneself in which we weave or link our stories of identities/becoming, which can be imagined as different fragmented texts. There are many different ways of creating these linkages and creating a multivocal construction of "who I am" (Bava, 2016). Just like surfing the Internet in search of a concept or meaning, with every click on a hyperlink we can gain greater clarity or get a bit confused, depending on how we make meaning. Similarly, the way we navigate from one linked story of ourselves to another, we create different stories about ourselves depending on the relationships and contexts we inhabit. Thus, one story of my relationship to religion is that I grew up in an Indian military family where religion, Islam, was foundational to our family life. Religion and culture, especially the cultures of Delhi and military life, were deeply intertwined. For instance, I experienced more liberation as a Muslim woman than as a Delhi girl. Or I experienced more constraints as a child being raised by a mother of three daughters whose husband (my father) was posted away from the family due to his military duty. However, it is hard to separate out these intricately intertwined threads. It guided our everyday practices and performances from eating, drinking, dressing, and conducting ourselves to relating to people. It has informed my humanistic stance and opened me up to complexity, diversity, and celebration of differences that I seek in life (as detailed in Bava, 2016).

Context and Religion

The intertwining of the political and spiritual has been a consistent theme in the history of Sikhs and continues to this day. From the inception of the faith, Sikh Gurus suffered religious persecution and much martyrdom. Sikhism arose as a direct challenge to the religious and political oppression unleashed by the rulers of the time. Punjab, a state in India and the birthplace of Sikhism, as a whole has witnessed much political and spiritual turbulence.

Sikhism rejects social inequality of any kind. Sikhs have a long history of critiquing inequity and political oppression. Uplifting and working for the underprivileged and being a change agent for the marginalization of women and those in different religions, castes, and abilities have historically been a practice for Sikhs. The value of social justice is deeply engrained in the Sikh psyche as well as the idea of nobility for each person.

The partition of India in 1947 split the province of Punjab between Pakistan and India. This time is known as the largest mass migration in human history (Cutts, 2000) and is a major marker in my (Kiran's) family's history. As a 4-year-old my father with his family migrated across the border into the new India, leaving behind their home and possessions. Thousands of Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus were killed in retributive genocide between different faith groups. My father had a memory of his father carrying the Guru Granth Sahib (the central religious scripture and considered to be the final Guru following the ten living Gurus) over his head, as a sign of respect as he walked across the border. The essence of this story as my father had expressed to me is that when life presents you with unbearable hardships that you cannot comprehend, keep your Guru close, as the Guru will see you through. The trauma of war, migration, and resettlement was softened by the family's faith in the Guru.

Several political events that took place in Punjab touched my family. The Punjabi Subha movement in the 1960s aimed at creating a Punjabi-speaking majority state where the Sikh identity could be preserved. My father, grandfather, and other men in the family were jailed during this time for protesting the Indian government's resistance to creating a Punjabi-speaking state. The women were forced to stay in their homes and protect their children. Other events included a series of political events in the 1980s and 1990s in Punjab that led to the crackdown on Sikhs by the Indian military, followed by the gruesome 1984 genocide of Sikhs. Grave human rights violations took place against Sikhs for years and to date nobody has been prosecuted. My family in India has been directly affected by these violent acts that continue to impact our lives today. Many diaspora Sikh families have been deeply impacted by these incidents in very tangible ways. I grew up at a time when Sikhs were on the headlines of the national news on a daily basis. The tensions did not remain within the borders of India. Many Canadian Sikhs were allegedly tied to the uprising and resistance to the Indian government and the desire to create an independent homeland. This is the context that I grew up in, where religion, politics, and one's safety were inextricably tied together.

The partition of India by the British also left a legacy of Hindu–Muslim conflict in the Indian subcontinent. Today we see the rise of Hindu nationalism in India where there are roughly 172 million Muslims (14.6% of the Indian population) (2011 Census, n.d.) and thus making India the country with the third largest Muslim population in the world. Similarly to Kiran, as far as I, Saliha, can remember, religion has always had a political subtext for me, even though those would not be the words I would have used as a child. As an Indian Muslim girl growing up in a military family context, I was cautioned to be careful. My dad would let us know that since he was a Muslim in the Indian Army, there was a file on him because of the discordant relationship between India and Pakistan resulting in strife across the borders. I have a memory as a child in elementary school, when there was an aggression between India and Pakistan, I sensed tension at home because my dad was actively engaged in troop and supplies movement. He cautioned us to be careful of how we talked. Though I didn't understand at that time, looking back over the years and connecting the dots, I realized that he didn't want his absolute loyalty to India to ever be questioned based on his religious identity.

Another source of the political underpinning to my religious identity flows from my mother's bedtime stories about Islam. When my father was posted away from our family during his tenure in the Army, as a child I would sleep with my mother, while my two older sisters slept in the adjacent room. My mom would put me to sleep by telling me religious stories as a way of cultivating a sense of religiosity and understanding for Islam. However, as we know, what one hears doesn't always correspond to what the teller intends. I believe my mom's intention was to inculcate in me the moral base for our religion, but the types of stories that have stuck with me are the ones that seem to have political underpinning to them. For instance, I remember the story of Prophet's first wife, Khadija, who was a businesswoman and older than he. So, I took away the message it is ok to be a businesswoman. Another message was about education; should one have to travel from Arabia to China in search of education, one should do so. These messages emphasized the values of identity and conviction as a woman. And the clearest message that has stayed with me is that religion has to update itself with time. Since some of the local customs of the Prophet's time influenced the emergence of religion, we need to adopt the spirit of the message and practice as it applies in today's context. Whether intended or not, I also derived these messages from the stories I was being taught while learning to read the Quran in Arabic from a teacher.

As I reflect, it is not lost on me that my mother's father valued education for his oldest child, my mother, and she did her very best to live up to her father's last wishes by going on to earn her doctoral degree. And even though she was raised by a very devout Muslim woman, my maternal grandmother, steeped in religious healing traditions but with limited formal education and who wore the hijab all her life, my mother never took to the veil or covering of her head. Was this my mother's way of adapting to the current times? Also, I wonder how my mother's academic focus on political science shaped her relationship to religion. My mother is a very devout Muslim woman herself, but she taught me to understand the spirit and not only the ritualistic traditions of the religion.

Thus, not only am I sensitive to the political underpinnings of religion, these experiences also made me sensitive to the politics of religion. We see with increased terrorism in the name of Islam and discrimination in the name of terror management, that religion is but a tool for political gain in the macro landscape of nation-states. The partition of India and Pakistan was just one example of it. And it continues to date in Indian politics, in American politics, and the world politics. Even if I seek to escape, I cannot. Thus, religion for political gains often plays out in our personal lives. The politics of religion shapes personal identities. The political is personal and the personal is political. As I seek to preserve my sense of freedom in the contexts of ever increasing Islamophobia and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, I increasingly see how the personal is political. I see the need to fight for my voice, my version, and my expression of religion (Bava, 2016). And the decision to write this chapter is a way to preserve my personal choice by political action to tell my story, my version, and my voice. It is my way to resist a hegemonic view of Islam in the face of politicizing of Islam—fundamentalism, terrorism, and/or Islamophobia.

Self, Community, and Faith

The relationship between self, community, and faith can be intricate. There are many benefits to being connected to our faith communities. Communities instill a sense of belonging. They provide modes of expression for faith and opportunities for reflection and learning. There have been times when we have raised our communities above our faiths, giving importance to the community story of how to live as faith-based and spiritual women, while choosing to internalize our own ideas and voices. Both of us have had to navigate this delicate terrain. We have both been engaged in finding ways to transcend our communities and certain messages within those communities so we are better aligned with our personal unique spiritual journeys. We choose to participate in our communities while challenging notions of religion that feel limiting or different from our lived experiences. For instance, I, Saliha, married a man who isn't a Muslim. Based on this action, one might question my faith; yet, this is a way to also question a religious practice where men can marry a woman who is not a Muslim, but women cannot. One explanation for this is because the child from such wedlock will follow the father's religion. This interpretive explanation is not only based in religion but also on the cultural traditions of the times when Islam was born. And there is no question that such an interpretation is patriarchal even though other interpretations are possible.

Communities can become agents of social control, and the policing of faith can become an obstruction to personal expressions of faith. We have continued to question the dominant discourses of our faiths often enforced by community while remaining engaged and participating in meaningful dialogue and relationships. I (Bava, 2016) believe that transcendent faith is achieved when "belief and faith based

on critical dialogue transcends the collective dominant discourse in its performance and is illustrative of one's preferred narrative" (p. 2).

Religion and Clinical Practice

For myself, Kiran, I deeply hold a commitment to social justice. I continue to evolve and to understand my own biases. It has taken several years of focused work to incorporate the idea of justice in my own life. Because of this process, I have patience and a nuanced understanding of my clients' own evolution toward their understanding of their lives.

I am highly attuned to circumstances in which my clients are feeling unjust treatment or control. My own experiences of oppression and the long legacy of injustice experienced by members of my faith have me listening deeply for these stories. At the core of my work is the commitment that all persons feel emancipated from their struggles and from ideas that are constraining. My work centers on transformation and healing that in my earlier life were described to me by my spiritual tradition.

My experiences have taught me to be more curious, beyond the story that the client is telling me. They have taught me to be more patient in the unfolding of the narratives. Some of the stories that come forth are half-told, half understandings, and it takes time to come to a more complete understanding of the ways in which the world impacts us.

My family's capacity to witness, hold, and heal pain has left me with my own ability to do the same in the therapy room. With my own communities of support, I continue to bear witness to challenges and triumphs as well as create opportunities for transformation and connection.

I, Saliha, come from a tradition of healers in my family. My family stories include, both on my maternal and paternal sides, extended family members who were seen as healers in their local community. Family members would have a vision when sleeping and were called to minister to pregnant women in labor. Also, some of the healers followed in the Sufi tradition. I have often wondered if my chosen path is the modern-day version of my family's legacy. As psychology replaces religion in our search for answers, are we turning to therapists to have the kinds of conversations one would have had with their spiritual guide? Is this why we sometimes refer to the therapeutic space as a sacred space? Often, I feel that my best in therapy comes from what I call being lost in the conversation, not seeking to consciously make sense, rather being carried by it. And I often refer to it as "being in a trance." Or being guided by what is emerging and trusting how my questions will connect various threads within the conversation *with* the client. When I try to be clever, I fail. When I stay in the process of pure wonderment, or what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls flow, creative connections are often made. It is hard to put into words what I often feel are experientially different forms of me in these relational spaces. Is this a spiritual moment that Rivett and Street (2001) speak of? And what are the

implications of speaking about therapy in this way? And what are the implications of not speaking in these words?

I, Saliha, view therapy as a relational space where we explore life's ambiguities and unknowns in conversation. I believe one thing that is certain is the constant change we experience in life. With change come uncertainty and a need to relate to it. Each of us cultivates practices to engage uncertainty. And religion may be viewed as one such practice to anchor us in the midst of life's uncertainties. In India, prayer is often recited at the initiation of any life event to evoke the blessing of Gods to guide one through the unknown forces. Everything from a new day to a new life or project is blessed with special prayers both in private and public spaces.

Religion, as a cultural tool of sense making, provides people with a unique resource for resilience, which can be explored in clinical practice (Walsh, 2009). For instance, a client might get tarot card readings and then come to therapy to discuss her sense of the readings. The tarot card readings might offer a doorway to making sense of her challenges and it can help us not only to listen and ask questions from within her way of sense making but also to honor her practices of anchoring herself in the midst of an uncertainty.

Keeping the Gates of the Soul Open

Given the hardships my, Kiran's, ancestors have experienced in preserving their faith, the current climate that I live in feels to be an extension of their struggle. This climate of fear and divisiveness, of paranoia and hatred, or being under attack because of the faith one practices or the way one looks bears resemblance to the climate my ancestors have survived through time (Arora, 2013).

There are times where I feel that I do not have the same level of grit that my ancestors had, that my parents possessed. The constant barrage of media rhetoric, of the racial, gender, and religious discrimination I experience both subtle and overt, has taken a toll. There are times where I want to shut down. My body and my relationships bear the scars of the impact of the social context we live in. Yet, the resiliency and the sweetness of my parents' life keep me from truly shutting down. I have watched them resist the forces that worked to take away their freedom to live in a country that is not their own. I have watched them stand up to job discrimination because of their brown skin. I have witnessed derogatory language being spewed at my father because of his turban. Yet my parents not only survived, but also thrived with dignity.

There were many reasons for them to shut down, give up, and lose faith. However, their unwavering faith in God and ability to move through hardship is a value that has been passed on to me. I believe that in any single moment I have the ability to reach deep into my spirit and expand beyond the hardship that is facing me. For me this expansion is nothing short of God's or a Spirit's work. It is beyond my immediate comprehension, yet I have faith in the realm that is outside of my understanding.

For me, Saliha, religion and its practice have always been private. I have often led with what I call my “hypertext identity” (Bava, 2016), which is situated and constitutive in interaction with others. And yet, I find that living in the United States for the last twenty years, I have continued to become more public with my views of practice as Islam has been politicized on the world stage. Quantitatively, my published scholarship leans more toward auto-ethnographically styled papers as a Muslim practitioner (rather than as a scholar of Islam) as compared to all of my other areas of scholarship. At every step as I experience religious strife, where Islam is questioned or there is rising Islamophobia, I feel like wishing it away. Yet, I come forth and write my way through it as a way to be agentic about expanding the public conversation while also not being personally silenced. This is my way to keep the gates of my soul open when I’m surrounded in fear and oppressive discourses. Call it a mindful practice for my relational, social, and mental health; a form of activism.

Practice Implications Derived from Our Personal, Spiritual, and Therapeutic Reflections

The religious and scientific traditions simply construct the world in different ways. We have erred for centuries in pitting these traditions against each other, and in the same way we have mistakenly pitted materialism against spiritualism, voluntarism against determinism, subjectivism against objectivism, and a host of related and misleading binaries. The important questions, as I see it, are how these various discursive traditions function in our lives together. What do they bring to us; what do they suppress; who is benefited and in what way; who is harmed? (Gergen, 2016, p. 78)

Drawing on Gergen, the question for us is whose moral order will we privilege in therapy? Is therapy part of the scientific tradition or something bigger? Therapy is one of the spaces in our lives where we explore meaning of our experiences, relationships, beliefs, and life. And spirituality “is defined as referring to the human experience of discovering meaning, which may or may not include the concept of a personal God” (Rivett & Street, 2001, p. 460). Resisting the current cultural move to legitimize psychotherapy scientifically, we propose that we need to locate it within a larger discursive tradition of healing and wellness that predates Freud and dates back to various wisdom traditions including religious and spiritual practices. Thus, we adopt both “instrumental” and “metaphysical” approaches to spirituality and religion in our clinical practices (Rivett & Street, 2001).

Therapy, Like Religion, is Not Apolitical

Both the theories and the context within which we practice are shaped by discourses of health, relationships, and effectiveness. Religion is an epistemological position—a way of knowing. All epistemologies are political. And one of the things we have

learned about the political nature of our living is, that we can make them Truths, if we don't hold them lightly and stay open to what else is emerging. Clients have their own ways of knowing. Thus, our job is to listen for our clients' epistemology and not be impositional with our own in the way we ask questions, but rather offer our alternative epistemology as a possibility. By attending to how we are listening *with* our client's logic, we strive to create space for different perspectives and avoid colonizing our client's or student's views, and instead help make the implicit more explicit.

Religion is Cultural

In our conversations, we both recognized cultural stories. Religion often becomes a vehicle for culture. And religion also varies across cultures. As mental health discourses openly embrace religious discourses, we have to continue to attend to what is also neglected. For instance, Sufism, Shamanism, and Voodoo are all forms of local spiritual practices that have been obscured by psychotherapy practices. And to engage in a culturally contextually relevant dialogue with our clients (Hines, 2016), we need to learn from and with them about their spiritual practices. For instance, Petry (2016) illustrates how spirituality can be explored over the life cycle as we unpack the cultural stories of anxiety, depression, poverty, oppression, interfaith marriages, and/or aging. Religion is both a carrier of culture and carried by culture. In training, as we explore self-of-the-therapist issues we need to attend to how students speak of their local practices, including being a nonbeliever. We remain curious.

Negotiating Realities

While curiosity is central, it is not enough. As hosts of conversations, we also have to attend to how we are relating (McNamee, 2004), both to each other and to the context that is recursively being created from within our relationship (Bava, 2017). Telling one's story of religiosity is no different from telling other stories or from how we negotiate our relationships. All relationships are negotiated realities. In negotiating these realities, we are constantly remaking our contexts, which in turn shape the relationship and the conversation. In the process of writing this paper, we discovered that the experience of negotiating one's religious identity felt different from negotiating other identities in other contexts. We discovered that within a context (of country or of relationship) where one's religion doesn't enjoy an equal status, we are negotiating from a one down position. Such a constant negotiation, from this one down place, made the process not only difficult but also created a potential context for being silenced and/or forcing the choice to fit in. It is a constant process of negotiating how to be "spontaneously responsive" (Shotter, 2006) into

uncertainty, into the unknowable. Consequently, in therapeutic and/or learning context, the question that arises is how to coordinate (Gergen, 2016) and be responsive (Shotter, 2006) in conversations where faith and religion are central to the conversation? How do we not get silenced in the face of a larger cultural discourse that creates supremacy of certain religions over others? Even though we might be curious with our clients and students, we also have to be contextually present. We have to create space for the complexity of negotiating and coordinating the conversation of religion within the context of dominant beliefs and nonbeliefs represented by the interlopers and the dominant political context within which the conversation might be occurring.

Honoring People's Voice and Their Right to Choose How They Tell Their Story

Just as we are aware that we wish for our voices and versions of religious practice to be honored, so do clients and students. They wish for their own voices to be honored. Voice and value are interlinked. So in listening, we are not only listening to their values, but also creating space for their voice to be heard and for them to be seen by their way of being seen. Each of us has a right to speak to our relationship with faith and the framework that shapes our stories. To exercise our right to choose our frameworks, we have to resist them being chosen for us by cultural traditions or discourses embedded in the media. Often, when we personally tell our story, it bumps up against the stories in the media and the people who consume those stories, creating a context that is not spacious enough to tell our own story (Bava, 2016). In our personal experiences, we have found some listeners tend to draw our story into their own frame of reference, rather than staying curious and open to changing their own frame. This raises the question often asked by Narrative therapists, "Who has the story telling rights?"

We believe that it is crucial to resist this process of media and cultural definition, while preserving each individual's personal choice to tell their story about their relationship with religion and spirituality, in the way they want to talk about it. Thus, in clinical practice, we practice the stance of curiosity and not-knowing (Anderson, 1997) as a way of being in inquiry about the client's preferred narrative rather than assuming their faith narrative based on our own understanding of their religious identity. We are curious how their story line developed for them within the dominant cultural context. We listen with care for how they speak of their relationship to the larger cultural discourse and their family's story line, learning what other stories intersected in the "choice" the person makes about their faith and its practice.

Case Examples

These two case examples highlight practice implications derived from our personal, spiritual, and therapeutic reflections. While this paper focuses on religion, we believe that at any given time, people are engaged in multiple discourses, negotiating their various cultural selves such as gender, and class, alongside religion. Segregated thinking often results in contrived divisions, which is why we encourage both/and thinking (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002). Taking a more complex, holistic, and interrelated approach to understanding one's relationship to religion inevitably requires one to be curious about other parts that make the person's identity. The two case examples presented here include a stance of curiosity and complexity as well as an embodiment of our practice implications across therapeutic and teaching environments.

I, Kiran, worked with Bani, a 32-year-old Sikh American woman living in New York City. She came to therapy to talk about her recent divorce and the impact it was having on her life and relationships. She complained of difficulty falling asleep and a general lack of interest in life. Bani was married for two years to a Sikh American man. Much of her marriage was rife with disagreements and a lack of emotional and physical intimacy. The principle of gender equity that Sikhism espoused was a source of disagreement between the couple when Bani referred to it while highlighting her choice to pursue male-dominated career opportunities. During her first session she shared the pain of having her marriage break down, including some level of antipathy from extended family members who thought she didn't work hard enough to secure her marriage. Bani seemed stuck on the stories that particular family members had of her marriage that seemed to question her future prospects. Many of these narratives focused on the taboo of divorce in the Indian culture. While this was problematic for Bani, she was more concerned with her understanding that while marriage is highly regarded in Sikhism, there is no concept of divorce in the Sikh tradition. She shared her love for Guru Nanak, the first Guru in Sikhism who is known for his stance on social justice. Bani struggled with her place in the faith given her divorce, although this was not immediately clear to her. In therapy, I worked with Bani to contextualize her pain within the larger sociocultural and religious context. We worked diligently to decentralize the story her family members had on what occurred in her marriage and continued to make room for her to name the challenges and agony she experienced.

What emerged was Bani's intense sadness at feeling disconnected from her faith, which in the past had been a source of comfort for her. Much of therapy including rewriting her relationship to her faith and addressing complexities which once felt like dichotomies to her. Could she belong to a faith that did not recognize divorce? Who gets to decide on whether she belongs to her faith community? How did the religion's emphasis on gender equality and justice apply to her unjust marriage? Over the course of our therapy, Bani began to attend a Sikh women's group where she could engage in dialogue with other community members struggling with these questions. Therapy provided a vehicle for Bani to create a more complex under-

standing of her divorce, to develop greater self-compassion and the voice to articulate a more nuanced and empowering relationship to Sikhism. During our last therapy session, I asked her what she thought Guru Nanak might say about her divorce? She responded, "He would say, I am so proud of you."

In the Master's program in Marriage and Family Therapy at Mercy College, I, Saliha, introduced a self-of-the-therapist exercise at the beginning of the internship year. As a way of creating a learning community (Anderson, 1999) and a reflective learning context, each student explores their own ethnicity and shares it with the class. They read about their respective ethnicities as described in McGoldrick, Giordano, and Preto (2005) and present reflections on the chapter in terms of their own ethnic experience. The assignment is designed to not only help students learn about ethnicity as a carrier of cultural discourses but also the variety of ways in which these ethnicity readings, as received knowledge, can apply and not apply to the families we might help. By critically reflecting on the readings about their own ethnicity based on their personal experiences, they bring a critical gaze both to received knowledge and to their own life. The students develop a critically curious stance toward expert knowledge and for listening to people's stories. The exercise also opens up space for students to be curious about each other's practices and to give voice to their curiosity by asking questions. The students also reflect on the reading and how it is intersectional or not.

At Mercy, we attract a number of immigrant students and students of color to the MFT program. Often religion is one of the most common intersectional social locations (in addition to gender and migration) that students reflect upon based on their family practices and the readings. One of the most engaged aspects of these presentations is how to view and engage in their local practices of Spiritualism, Voodoo, Shamanism, etc. as practiced within their family-of-origin and how to bridge it with psychotherapy. Usually, there is a degree of familiarity of the local spiritual practices as bystanders but an absence of its practice in their own life. Often I observe a shift in the presentation tone. I wonder aloud with my students about the tone, asking if the tone embodies skepticism, or hesitancy, or something else? One of the student-presenters stated she was unsure how to place her country of origin's spiritual practice within the practice of psychology and therapy. When prompted to unpack what she meant by psychology, she identified her lack of knowing on how to combine her spiritual practice with DSM diagnosis, and whether they were incompatible. At times I continue to engage in a reflective conversation, with their permission, about their personal spiritual practices and their relationship to religion/spirituality. At other times I draw on this as an opening to engage the concept of *both/and* and how we hold contradictions (see case in Bava, 2017), or share a case example of how I engaged a client's deep commitment to tarot card reading with therapy or I might share a reading about the value of religion/spirituality and reflect on the notion of psychological science as western science that we are exporting to the world at large, and the need to be critical, reflective practitioners who have to learn to have complex conversations rather than look for a singular answer. At other times, I might have the class see Nigerian novelist and TED speaker Chimamanda Adichie's (2009) video on the danger of single stories and have them reflect on

single stories in their life that are indeed plural. I see all these ways as conversational prompts for the rich dialogue that ensues and continues throughout the semester, as students see clients, and make connections between the presentation, dialogues, their personal experiences, and clinical cases.

By the simple activity of being curious about their tone of presentation, I'm inviting them to be public about the internal dialogue rather than being factual about the spiritual practice. I learn with them how they dance with their complex relationship to the concepts of religion, intersectionality, therapy, science, etc., rather than emphasize the factual religious practice. I'm curious how they developed their own relationship to religion and what were the constraining and liberating familial and cultural stories that guided this relationship. My goal is not only to create a learning context where we listen with curiosity and care but also to be inclusive of diverse religious practices while helping students to develop a critical reflective gaze toward all practices—religious and clinical—without outright rejecting that which initially we don't understand. I encourage my students to seek understanding by exploring their traditions with their family and community elders and not shy away from it.

By opening up the conversation, other students become curious and also start making connections to their own life, for instance, talking to the dead, creating altars, etc. For instance, one of the students reflected,

I learned so much about myself and what caught my attention was the fact that I am exposed to a religion that many simply don't understand... These conversations have been shaping me as a therapist because it is strengthening my self-awareness. I have been hiding who I am for a long time, in order to satisfy my family, friends, and the social world. Therefore, learning about my culture, experiencing different things in life and talking about them has made me feel confident about who I am and what I can bring in my work field. (Anonymous, personal communication, October 9, 2016)

I find this critically reflexive exercise to be a resonant way to create a learning condition about identity and self as sociocultural processes. Such expansive conversations create teaching/learning moments that are not binary. Rather, students learn how to have complex conversations that are respectful of both believers and nonbelievers of faith, religion, and God.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to underscore the ongoing fluid nature of the relationship between self and religion. Our religious lives are impacted by the many discourses we are embedded in. This includes but is not limited to family, national, political, media, and cultural discourses at any given time across our lifespan. We work from this premise as professors and therapists. This process of writing has been one of exploration, discovery, and co-creation. The elements of this paper came forth through multiple conversations and questions, which we posed to one another and then reflected on. Through these conversations, we discussed several practice implications for therapists and educators to keep in mind. These practice

implications are honoring clients' voices; therapy not being apolitical; religion being a dimension of culture, right to choose and tell one's story; and negotiation of realities. We believe that our reflections are true in this moment and time, and that we will continue to explore, discover, and make meaning of our relationship to religion and its impact on our lives.

References

- 2011 Census. (n.d.). *C-1 population by religious community*. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. Retrieved from <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-01.html>
- Adichie, C. (2009). *Chimamanda Adichie: The danger of a single story* [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html
- Anderson, H. (1997). *Conversation, language, and possibilities: A postmodern approach to therapy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Anderson, H. (1999). Collaborative learning communities. In S. McNamee & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Relational responsibility: Resources for sustainable dialogue* (pp. 65–70). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Arora, K. S. K. (2013). Reflections on the experiences of turbaned Sikh men in the aftermath of 9/11. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, 5(1), 116–121.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. (M. Holquist, Ed., C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). [Kindle Edition]. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)
- Bava, S. (2016). Making of a spiritual/religious hyperlinked identity. In D. Bidwell (Ed.), *Spirituality, social construction and social processes: Essays and reflections* (pp. 1–17). Chargin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publication.
- Bava, S. (2017). Creativity in couple and family therapy. In J. L. Lebow, A. L. Chambers, & D. Breunlin (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of couple and family therapy*. New York: Springer. Available at: https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-3-319-15877-8_226-1.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Cutts, M. (2000). *The state of the world's refugees 2000: Fifty years of humanitarian action*. Geneva: UNHCR.
- Gergen, K. (2016). Constructing spirit, spiritualizing construction. In D. Bidwell (Ed.), *Spirituality, social construction and social processes: Essays and reflections* (pp. 68–86). Chargin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publication.
- Hardy, K. V., & Laszloffy, T. A. (2002). Couple therapy using a multicultural perspective. In A. S. Gurman & N. S. Jacobson (Eds.), *Clinical handbook of couple therapy* (3rd ed., pp. 569–593). New York: Guilford Press.
- Hines, P. (2016). The life cycle of economically fragile families. In M. McGoldrick, N. G. Preto, & B. Carter (Eds.), *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family and social perspectives* (pp. 99–117). Boston: Pearson.
- McGoldrick, M., Giordano, J., & Preto, N. G. (2005). *Ethnicity and family therapy* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
- McNamee, S. (2004). Therapy as social construction. In T. Strong & D. Pare (Eds.), *Furthering talk: Advances in the discursive therapies* (pp. 253–270). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Press.

- Petry, S. (2016). Spirituality and the family life cycle. In M. McGoldrick, N. G. Preto, & B. Carter (Eds.), *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family and social perspectives* (pp. 156–171). Boston: Pearson.
- Rivett, M., & Street, E. (2001). Connections and themes of spirituality in family therapy. *Family Process, 40*, 459–467.
- Shotter, J. (2006). Understanding process from within: An argument for ‘witness’-thinking. *Organization Studies, 27*(4), 585–604. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840606062105>.
- Walsh, F. (2009). *Spiritual resources in family therapy*. New York: Guilford Press.