Genealogies of spirituality: An historical analysis of a travelling term

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To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2019.1658261

Published online: 27 Aug 2019.
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ABSTRACT
In the current discussion of spirituality in healthcare, the historical and cultural backgrounds of spiritual terminology and practices are often neglected. Avoiding the standard narratives, which tend to be based on a single concept of spirituality, the present paper provides an overview of the genealogies of the term ‘spirituality’, paying particular attention to the concept’s heterogeneity and history of bifurcation. The historical reconstruction outlines the complex travels of spirituality in delineating the etymological legacies of early and mediaeval Christianity, late-mediaeval and early modern mysticism, romanticism and, finally, of the amalgamations of all these things in the twentieth century. Tracing the development of the terminology in this way will elucidate the historical roots of the current ambiguities of spirituality. Over time, spirituality has crossed different cultural spaces and has been invested with new meanings. The final sections concern the presence of the various pasts of spirituality and the ongoing travelling of this term in the world of healthcare. It will be argued that ‘spirituality’ shares its ambiguous character with the concept of ‘health’. As health-related spirituality is inevitably imbued with value and connected with healthcare politics and law, the task of clarifying this ‘travelling concept’ will remain as important as it is interminable. Research in the field of health-related spirituality must free itself from the illusion of universally valid concepts with stable meanings. An improved understanding of the many pasts of spirituality can make a valuable contribution to the perception and understanding of the fluid, emergent and sometimes contradictory phenomena associated with the concept.

KEYWORDS
Genealogy of spirituality; spiritual care; healthcare; travelling concepts; world health organization

Introduction
It has recently been suggested that current discussions of spirituality, especially in the realm of healthcare, lack a sense of its historical and cultural backgrounds (Inbadas 2016). Standard narratives purporting to tell the history of spirituality go in one of two directions: some are focused exclusively on the modern usage of ‘spirituality’ and narrate the recent career of the term as produced by the ongoing transformation of institutional forms of religion. Other narratives discover ‘spirituality’ at every point in human history. However, by privileging one particular concept of spirituality, both narratives neglect its historical complexity. While narratives of the first type fail to consider the ongoing histories of religious
spirituality in modern times and before, narratives of the second type are over-inclusive (Humphrey 2015). Hall and his colleagues put the critique in this way:

The observation that all humans are spiritual is analogous to observing that all languages follow similar linguistic patterns of syntax and semantics. Linguistics can never substitute for living language, and spirituality can never stand alone, divorced from its cultural-linguistic context. (Hall, Koenig, and Meador 2004, 394)

In order to overcome such reductive narratives, a detailed reconstruction of the terminological history may be helpful. The present paper gives an overview of the genealogies of the term ‘spirituality’, focusing mainly on conceptual variations and bifurcations. The plural ‘genealogies’ is important here: the historical analysis unveils not one single genealogy of spirituality, but many. The terminological tracking will elucidate the historical roots of current ambiguities. The following historical reconstruction outlines in four sections the complex travels of ‘spirituality’. I shall trace the legacies of early and mediaeval Christianity, late-mediaeval and early modern mysticism, and romanticism (including Mesmerism and Transcendentalism). Finally, I shall focus on the amalgamations of all this in the twentieth century, with a special regard to the ‘healthification’ of spirituality (Borup 2017, 20).

The final two paragraphs are concerned with the presence of the various pasts of ‘spirituality’ and in particular with the ongoing travelling of this term in the world of healthcare. Focusing on a particular realm, seen as paradigmatic for a much broader development, I consider to what extent ‘spirituality’ is a useful ‘travelling concept’ (Bal 2002) in current research, professional practice, and politics. Public health and interprofessional spiritual care have to cope with a plurality of value-laden ‘spiritualities’. The way health politicians, managers and caregivers frame spirituality impacts upon their decisions. Empirical research in healthcare is currently not only accelerating the travel of ‘spirituality’ across the globe but it is also influencing the usage of the term in clinical practice. The following reconstruction is based on the hope that an in-depth understanding of the many pasts of ‘spirituality’ can make a valuable contribution to an improved comprehension of fluid spiritual phenomena, especially in healthcare.

Highlighting institutional backgrounds and historical lineages of current usages of the term, the paper challenges the idea that today’s ‘spiritualities’ are primarily the individualized, de-traditionalized and de-institutionalized heirs of institutional religion. Put simply, the emphasis on inwardness, immediacy, and healing inspiration belong to the metaphorical matrix of spirituality; it is part of a multilayered tradition whose longue durée is easily underestimated.

Like all academic texts, this one is embedded in the context of an individual life. When some years ago I started to engage with the interdisciplinary research field ‘spiritual care’, I joined the camp of those who complain about the lack of historical and theological perspectives in health-related discussions on spirituality. This contribution is an answer to the question of what it might mean to bring these separated fields of research into conversation with each other.

The metaphorical matrix and conceptual disambiguation

The past and present variety of the term ‘spirituality’ can be explained by the ambiguity of its metaphorical matrix. The term has its roots in the Latin spiritus and its manifold
metaphorical significations. They oscillate between anthropological, cosmological and theological denotations. This applies equally to biblical writings. According to the *Dictionnaire critique de théologie*, the Old Testament term *ruah*, which was consistently translated into Latin as *spiritus*, was used about 80 times for the human spirit and 31 times for the spirit of *JHWH* (Beauchamp 1998, 404), while the Greek New Testament word *pneuma* refers 47 times to an aspect of human beings and approximately 275 times to God and its vitalizing presence (Zumstein and Dettwiler 1998, 405). In St Paul’s letters, *pneumatikos* is to be understood exclusively in the theological sense of ‘inspired by the Holy Spirit’ (Barclay 2004), while the noun *pneuma* is also used in an anthropological sense (*e.g.* in 1 Thess 5:23 where ‘spirit’, ‘soul’ and ‘body’ constitute the totality of human being).

The tension between anthropological and theological concepts of ‘spirit’ and ‘spiritualis’ is already present in the biblical literature. With regard to the complex reception of this broad metaphorical fund, the history of spirituality can be seen as a number of parallel attempts to conceptualize metaphorical language in theological, philosophical, legal or scientific discourses. The tension between metaphorical density and conceptual disambiguation is a constant in the history (and the current usage) of the travelling term spirituality.

With the emergence of the abstract noun *spiritualitas*, the threshold between metaphorical and conceptual language was crossed at an identifiable historical point. The noun appears neither in the Vulgate nor in other early Latin translations of the Bible, nor in Early Christian literature. The first known occurrence is in the fifth century, and it is perhaps significant that this followed the First Council of Constantinople (381) which brought the heated pneumatological controversy to an end. According to Solignac (1990), the earliest instance is to be found in a letter written at the beginning of the fifth century, probably by the theologian Pelagius. The addressee, a newly baptized Christian, is urged to read eagerly in the Holy Scriptures as well as to live in accordance with them in order to ‘make progress in spirituality (in spiritualitate). The recipient of the letter should sow in the spirit in order to reap ‘in spiritualibus’.

In this letter, the abstract noun *spiritualitas* is used to name the personal piety of Christians as well as its essence and goal: a life imbued with the Holy Spirit. The author takes up a terminology that goes back to the Pauline writings in the New Testament. The adjective *pneumatikos*, central in these writings, signals the transforming presence of God’s *pneuma* in Christian life. Hence, Early Christianity understood itself as a spiritual movement. And it criticized forms of religious legalism with similar arguments to those that contemporary spiritual movements employ to criticize the legalism of the Church. In contrast to the writings of philosophers such as Seneca, who equated the idea of a life guided by an ‘inner spirit’ with living according to reason (*secundum rationem vivere*), Early Christian texts use the term *pneumatikos* without intellectual overtones to refer to the activity of the Holy Spirit in all dimensions of life.

As it is used in the letter quoted, the abstract noun *spiritualitas* partly preserves the pneumatological meaning of the Pauline *pneumatikos* (‘spirit[ualis]’). Nonetheless, it already foreshadows the more ontological denotations which became dominant no later than in the twelfth century. In the context of the emerging scholasticism *spiritualitas* was increasingly used in contrast to the term *corporalitas* and served as an umbrella term for all things and practices that did not belong to the realm of worldly affairs but to an ontologically higher sphere of things with immaterial value. Richard of St Victor
gives this formulation: ‘Extra nos corporalia, intra nos spiritualia, supra nos divina’ (Benjamin Minor ch. 55; Richard de Saint-Victor 1997, 250). The new ambiguity of the term can be found in Thomas Aquinas who used it both for Christian living and for distinguishing two ontological realms:

Thomas mentions spirituality fairly often, taking it both in the biblical sense of living in the power of the Holy Spirit bestowed on us through the risen Christ, and in the newer philosophical understanding as the opposite of corporeality (McGinn 2005, 27).

Even more important for the later development is the circumstance that the contrast between the spiritual (eternal) and the secular (temporal) realm was politically shaped by the Gregorian Reform and is consequently reflected in canon law. The jurisdiction of the Church, in distinction to the worldly law, is bound to the spiritual realm. Whoever and whatever belonged to it was to be called spiritual. With this legal denotation the Latin term was later translated in the vernacular. The Middle French word espiritualité, first documented in the thirteenth century, primarily has this legal signification (Leclercq 1962, 292).

With the longue durée of the canon law, the legal distinction between spiritual and secular influenced terminological usage until the twentieth century. To quote only one remarkable example: Article 37 of the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field, ratified in 1949, reads as follows: The religious, medical and hospital personnel assigned to the medical or spiritual care […] shall, if they fall into the hands of the enemy, be respected and protected’ (Geneva Convention 1949). Although the Geneva Convention abstains from any ontological commitment, in discriminating between spiritual and medical care it harks back to a distinction formed by mediaeval theology and politics.

**Mystical reshaping in the Late Middle Ages and early modernity**

While the ontological and legal reframing of spiritualitas was the work of scholastic theology and as such a product of the defining culture of those times, the later history of the term spirituality was equally influenced by heterodox spiritual movements as it was by mainstream theology. In addition to the radical Franciscan followers of Joachim of Fiore who preached the new age of the Holy Spirit, the Late Middle Ages knew many and various ‘free spirits’. A common trait of the heterogeneous people and groups which were subsumed under this heresiological term was the claim of having found direct access to the Holy Spirit. Regularly quoting St Paul’s ‘Ubi spiritus, ibi libertas’ (2 Cor 3:17) they understood themselves as Christians who were freed by the Holy Spirit. In contrast, official theology tended to regard them as wayward spirits and as such a danger to Church and society.

The dissemination of the term ‘spirituality’ in the modern vernacular started with the mystical current in seventeenth-century France which was seen by its opponents as a descendant of the mediaeval and protestant spiritualism. The label ‘nouvelle spiritualité’, which emerged at the same time as the noun ‘mystique’ and was used to characterize this mystical current, might initially have had a derogative meaning. The approbatory one is documented, a century later, not only in mystical writings, such as (Pseudo-) Caussade’s L’Abandon à la Providence divine (2005, 33), but also in d’Alembert and Diderot’s
Encyclopedia. In its short article on ‘spiritualité’, published in 1751, two meanings of the term are registered. First, the ‘spirituality of the soul that is used to signify its quality which is unknown to us and is essentially distinct from matter’; second, ‘the same term is also used for an honest and special piety, which is devoted to meditation on the most subtle and detached aspects of religion’ (Diderot and d’Alembert 1751, 478).

The mystical imprint, which characterizes the French coinage of ‘spiritualité’, will remain typical up to and throughout the modern era. It is likely that the English term ‘spirituality’ was derived from the French ‘spiritualité’. The passage from French mysticism to American Protestantism foreshadows the future travel of the term. One of the writers who might have introduced the term with its mystical flavour into modern English was John Fletcher, born at Lake Geneva in 1729 as Jean Guillaume de la Fléchère. Of Huguenot stock, de la Fléchère studied in Geneva and read the works of seventeenth-century French mystics in the original. During a stay in London, he met Charles Wesley and became one of the most fervent supporters of the Methodist’s evangelical mysticism. The term ‘spirituality’ emerges in his writings no later than in 1784 when he used it in a letter dated the 27th of April (Fletcher 1836, 365). Fletcher may not have been the first to use the newly coined term in this way. Twenty years earlier, the Anglican Thomas Hartlex, who also belonged to the evangelical revival, had already used the term in his Short Defense of the Mystical Writers. For Hartlex, the mystics were the guardians of the ‘spirituality of true religion’ (Schmidt 2012, 42).

The romantic legacy: cosmological spiritualities

On the threshold of the eighteenth century, a new factor emerged out of Mesmerism and related currents, one which would have a strong impact on the subsequent history of spirituality and its relationship with medicine. Physician Anton Mesmer’s ‘animal magnetism’ melded the scientific understanding of this time with occultist traditions, and served as a theoretical framework for therapeutic experiments (Baier 2009). The enormous success of mesmerism, spreading from Vienna to France, Scotland and the United States, was due to its combination of modern medical science and energetic healing. In the mesmeric crucible, spirituality was enriched with new denotations. An early example of the new usage is to be found in the work Ueber Sympathie und Magnetismus, published in 1789 by Johann Heinrich Rahn, professor of Physics and Mathematics in Zurich. Rahn postulated that spirituality (‘Spiritualität’) distinguishes human beings from animals, although the degree of spirituality can vary from person to person (Rahn 1789). In mesmerist writings, the term spirituality was connected to the cosmic flow of healing energies. What differentiated mesmerist concepts from mediaeval theology or ontology was the mesmerist’s distance from religious beliefs and the emphasis on scientific justifications.

Although mesmerism was on the wane by the middle of the nineteenth century, it formed an influential and enduring model of a scientifically based spirituality which was linked to modernity and innovation as well as to therapeutic practices. Among the heirs of this model, the American Transcendentalists were probably one of the most seminal. Leading figures like Amos Bronson Alcott, who was also acquainted with seventeenth-century French mysticism (Schmidt 2012, 43), strove for a spirituality which would transcend all religious and political divisions of the past. A remarkable instance of the new, refashioned term is to be found in Walt Whitman’s Democratic Vistas, published in 1871.
in the wake of the American Civil War. For Whitman (2010, 43), spirituality is to be seen as the highest form of religion, which cannot be reached by dint of church piety but rather in lonely meditation and aesthetic ecstasy. Despite his emphasis on self-reliance, the final goal Whitman pleaded for was not the perfection of the individual but of a democratic community. The lasting success of American transcendentalism can be found in its ability to meld divergent traditions in creative ways. Along with the French mystics and the mesmerists, the Unitarians, Romantic poetics and the writings of Swedenborg also contributed to this spiritual crucible (Fuller 2001).

Among these influences, romantic orientalism deserves special consideration. The first German and English translations of Sanskrit texts were widely read in mesmerist and transcendentalist circles nourishing a romantic orientalist vision of the ‘spiritual wisdom of the East’ (Halbfass 1988; King 1999; App 2010). Mediated by theosophical movements, this vision was ultimately rooted in colonial India whence it spread to North America and Europe in the following decades. The most important figure for the circulation of ideas might be Swami Vivekananda, who imbued the term ‘spirituality’ with connotations that remain in currency today (cf. Baier 2009, 467–485). The son of an erudite and liberal lawyer, the preacher-to-be of Neo-Hinduism received a solid European education in Calcutta through which he became acquainted with modern Western philosophy. His later understanding of Hindu spirituality bears traces of Arthur Schopenhauer’s interpretation of Vedanta (Halbfass 1988, 239–240). Before he met Ramakrishna at the age of 18, Vivekananda considered himself an agnostic. Thus, his contrast between Western materialism with Indian spirituality may have been inspired by his personal experience of conversion.

Between 1893 and 1896, during Vivekananda’s first lecture tour of Europe and the United States, spirituality became the watchword of his Neo-Hindu message. He criticized the materialism of the West as well as the intolerance of the monotheistic faiths while praising India as ‘the treasure-house of religion and spirituality’ (1970, 148) and as a ‘glorious land of religious toleration’ (1970, 187). This discourse is congruent with Vivekananda’s anti-colonial reform programme, which contrasted the spiritual poverty of the secular West with India’s religious wealth. Swami Vivekananda’s concept of spirituality was shaped not only by the contrast between East and West, but even more by the binary distinction between ritualistic forms of religion and more interior ones. Similar to the way in which Transcendentalists praised Christian mysticism while criticizing Church ceremonies and institutions, Vivekananda distinguished between the ceremonial and the spiritual aspects of Hinduism. In his version, Hindu spirituality encompasses a certain philosophy and meditative practice, but not ritual practices and popular beliefs. Advocating a ‘puritan’ form of neo-Hinduism, he downplayed Tantric rituals, in particular, with their sexual symbolism (Urban 2003, 134). Impressive in appearance and rhetoric, Vivekananda shaped the long-lasting template of a Far-East spirituality which is tolerant, therapeutic, and based on meditation and direct mystical experience.

Re-articulations and amalgamations in the twentieth century

The widespread and varied usage of the term ‘spirituality’ in the twentieth century is a field of research in its own right. I shall focus mainly on developments in healthcare which I consider as a paradigmatic realm of modern society. Although it is difficult to obtain an
accurate overview of all the terminological ramifications, a number of clearly distinct branches of discourse can be retraced. They resume, rearticulate and amalgamate previous usages, not least the legalistic one. The Geneva Convention, quoted above, is not the only example of the long history of the legal distinction between spiritual and secular. The distinction played a prominent role in the rise of late-modern spiritual care as well. The spiritual care which the Geneva Convention contrasted with medical care was seen exclusively as a duty of chaplains, although medical missionaries and Christian nurses were practising their own forms of spiritual care. In the middle of the twentieth century, organizations such as the US-American Nurses Christian Fellowship (NCF), founded in the 1930s, started to claim spiritual care as a professional responsibility of nursing in general. In the 1960s, the NCF organized workshops on the spiritual needs of patients and launched the first research projects in the field. A fruit of this endeavour, the first edition of Sharon Fish’s and Judith A. Shelly’s *Spiritual Care: The nurse’s role* appeared in 1978. In this book ‘spiritual care’ is seen no more in Christian terms, but has been transformed into a duty of a secular profession.

Another terminological branch, not directly connected with healthcare but important for the transformation of spirituality in the twentieth century, can be found in the Catholic *renouveau mystique*. While the two usages of ‘spiritualité’ registered by d’Alembert and Diderot in their *Encyclopaedia* continued into the nineteenth century, on the threshold of the twentieth century, a subtle change was brought about by the pioneers of a broad movement which rehabilitated the French mystics of the seventeenth century. One main figure of the *renouveau mystique* was the priest Auguste Saudreau, who, in 1896, published his ground-breaking work *Les degrés de la vie spirituelle*, followed more than twenty years later by his *Manuel de spiritualité*. For Saudreau ‘spiritualité’ was not primarily ‘an honest and special piety’ of a small group of mystics but the essence of Christian life. After a long and heated theological debate, Saudreau’s new usage of the term became commonplace in mainstream Catholic theology. A good example of this integration is the voluminous *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* (1932–1995). Although its main advocates were French, the *renouveau mystique* had an international impact, influencing prominent theologians, such as Karl Rahner and Hans-Urs von Balthasar. Saudreau’s first work was translated into English as early as 1907, followed by the translation of his second work in 1927. In the 1920s, they were joined by the English translation of Pierre Pourrat’s *La spiritualité chrétienne* (Fr. 1922–1929; Engl. transl. 1922–1924; Pourrat 1922). It is probably the first published book which has the English term ‘spirituality’ combined with the specifying adjective ‘Christian’ in its title. This usage, which is still flourishing in Christian theology today, can be seen as an enriched version of the late antique version of the term. The question whether ‘spirit’ in ‘Christian spirituality’ refers primarily to the Holy Spirit or to an aspect of human life, is still in debate (Peng-Keller 2010).

Outside organized religion, the heirs of the mesmerists and the transcendentalists refined and disseminated their concepts of ‘unchurched spirituality’ (Fuller 2001; Baier 2009; White 2009) while ambassadors of the ‘spiritual East’ found their way to Europe and America. As in the case of Vivekananda, the interchange between Western concepts of spirituality and the message of Eastern masters like Hazrat Inayat Khan, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi resulted in a ‘whirlpool effect’. In highly complex cross-fertilizations, practices like Hatha Yoga or Zazen were extracted from
their interpretative contexts and labelled as ‘spiritual’. This ‘healthification’ of Hindu and Buddhist practices (Borup 2017, 20) was embedded in a broad range of twentieth-century movements which aimed to foster physical and mental health through bodily and spiritual exercise. While some of them were explicitly secular or trans-religious, such as the New Thought, others were firmly Christian, like the YMCA (Putney 2001; White 2009), or had a Christian background, as for instance Alcoholics Anonymous (Galanter and Kaskutas 2008; Taves 2017).

The different conceptual traditions of the term ‘spirituality’ flowed together in a groundbreaking discussion conducted at the 36th and 37th World Health Assemblies in 1983–1984 (Peng-Keller 2017, 2019). Initiated by Samuel Hynd, the Health Minister of Swaziland, and supported notably by delegates from the Gulf States and the Director General, Halfdan Mahler, the WHA finally adopted resolution A37.13 which emphasizes, for the first time in the history of the WHO, the significance of the spiritual dimension for the Organization’s understanding of health. In the discussions leading up to the resolution, the term ‘spiritual dimension’ served the purpose of bridging the divide between the opposing world views of the Cold War era. It is noteworthy that even the delegates from the Gulf States were adamant about differentiating between the spiritual dimension and religious references. The distinction between ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ surfaced in the discussion as an ontological differentiation between two spheres of reality (material reality/mental reality), or as an anthropological differentiation (body/soul). The discussions, carried out in the context of the WHO’s Health for All programme, were inspired by a humanistic ethos. In Mahler’s view, the programme itself represented one of the ‘ennobling ideas’ that contributes to humanity’s material and immaterial welfare and thus could justifiably be called ‘spiritual’. Contrary to the modern tendency to keep anything spiritual in the private realm, the spiritual dimension was now seen as deeply engrained in communities and community-building practices.

The variety of ‘spirituality’ in the twenty-first century: the presence of the various pasts

Mikhail Bakhtin’s formula ‘every meaning will have its homecoming festival’ (Bakhtin 1986, 170; Bender 2016) is certainly true for the term ‘spirituality’ and its metaphorical background. The older meanings survive while new amalgamations arise in highly complex interactions. What is often decried as the ‘fuzziness’ of the term would be better described as the co-presence of diverging usages. They are historically linked but conceptually heterogeneous (La Cour, Ausker, and Hvidt 2012; Ammerman 2013; Streib and Hood 2016). The spectrum of denotations runs from the Christian understanding of spirituality, as living inspired by the Holy Spirit, to anthropological concepts (e.g. spirituality as the actualization of the human tendency to self-transcendence), and finally to what can be described as ‘spiritualities of life’ (Heelas 2008) or ‘new metaphysicals’ (Bender 2010). As Ammerman points out, these understandings are not mutually exclusive. People with God-oriented spiritualities (Christian, Neo-pagan, etc.) often integrate aspects of more immanent ‘spiritualities of life’. And the idea ‘that real spirituality is about living a virtuous life, one characterized by helping others, transcending one’s own selfish interests to seek what is right’ (Ammerman 2013, 272), is shared by almost all groups.

Bender’s (2010) studies offer illuminating explanations of the lack of historical consciousness in contemporary discussions of spirituality. With regard to the spiritual
seekers she interviewed in Cambridge MA, Bender (2010, 181) suggests that their tendency to ignore history might be attributed to the ‘anti-nostalgic premise’ of being free of the ambiguities and the cultural weight of the past: ‘freed from our pasts and thus our sins’.

It is no coincidence that this sentence from Bender could be read, in another context, as a summary of Pauline theology. What connects Paul’s living according to the Holy Spirit with current non-religious spirituality is the emphasis on a salvific immediacy. To put it another way: the different concepts of spirituality are typically framed in terms of dichotomous distinctions (interior v. exterior, immediate v. mediate, immaterial v. material). If spirituality is linked with interiority, immediacy, and immateriality, then it would seem to transcend the contingencies of history.

Moreover, by changing the focus from spiritual seekers to sociological research on modern religion and spirituality, Bender offers a second explanation for the historical blindness of today’s spiritual seekers. In a paper co-authored with McRoberts, she questions the tendency of American sociologists of religion to:

- juxtapose spirituality to religion and identify the former by way of what it lacks in comparison to the latter. In particular, spirituality would appear to lack institutions, authority structures, community, and even history — all of which are considered integral to religion, such as it is widely understood today. (Bender and McRoberts 2012, 2)

Seen in this way, Bender and McRoberts (2012) suggest, spirituality ‘appears as either the weak cousin or the crazy uncle of the norm that continues (or that should continue) to endure’ Regarding spirituality as a purely modern phenomenon, the sociologists criticized by Bender and McRoberts are prone to a similar ahistoricism to that of the spiritual seekers themselves.

With regard to healthcare-related discourses on spirituality, further factors may help to explain the historical blindness: first, the hegemony of quantitative research, with its concentration on the present time. Until now, historical considerations have played only a marginal role in research on spiritual care – even though the lack of historical sensitivity causes much confusion in this field. (It remains to be seen whether, and to what extent, empirical research on spirituality itself, through its introduction into surveys, is a contributory factor in the shaping of the term.)

Second, empirical research on spirituality in healthcare has a tendency to naturalize the plurality of heterogenous spiritualities. One of the remarkable paradoxes of this naturalization is that the ‘spiritual dimension’, a holistic notion aimed at redressing the dominance of the biomedical approach, is made to fit seamlessly into the prevailing mind/body dualism.

Third, marginalizing the differences through an all-encompassing concept of spirituality can also be a strategy for coping with competing world-views and religious claims. The WHO’s terminological policy follows this trend. While this may be a wise solution under some circumstances, it is imperative to be mindful of the limitations of such an approach.

**Spirituality as a travelling concept in health-related research**

What may be useful in healthcare politics and diplomacy might not be the best approach for research on spiritual care. A neat diplomatic solution in the context of global health is
at best a good starting point for further conceptual clarifications. But is it possible to transform the travelling term ‘spirituality’ (with its cognates ‘spiritual dimension’, ‘spiritual care’, etc.) into a sound concept? Should we search for an overarching concept of spirituality? Or is it more reasonable to limit the scientific task either to conceptualizing specific aspects of spirituality (e.g. ‘spiritual distress’) or to distinguishing and relating different usages of spirituality in everyday language (Streib and Hood 2016)? And with regard to the inter- or transdisciplinary character of research on spirituality in healthcare: how should we go about achieving a convergence between different disciplines and approaches?

The last point is characteristic of interdisciplinary research in general. Scientific concepts are always embedded in larger theoretical frameworks. When these concepts cross disciplinary borders, changes in meaning are inevitable. Nevertheless, interdisciplinary research cannot dispense with shared concepts. To handle this problem of ambiguity, Bal (2002) introduced the meta-concept of ‘travelling concepts’ which bridge the gap between different disciplines and contexts. For Bal the instability of meaning typical of such discourses should not be regarded as something that can and should be eliminated. On the contrary, the meaning-transforming and non-linear travel of concepts between disciplines can serve as a creative driving force for research – on the condition that the travelling and the transformations are noticed and discussed (Swinton and Pattison 2010).

It is beyond doubt that ‘spirituality’ is a paradigmatic case of a travelling concept. More than many other concepts labelled in this way, it has changed colour and shape in its restless travelling between different discursive worlds. It shares its ambiguous and contested character with other basic concepts in science, particularly with the concept of ‘health’. Hence, the task of clarifying the concept of spirituality will remain as important as it is interminable. That is all the more true as health-related spirituality is inevitably imbued with value and connected with healthcare politics and law (Sullivan 2014; Balboni and Balboni 2019). For stakeholders in healthcare and health-related research, spirituality is considered to be important insofar as it fosters health and dignity, and helps people cope with illness and death. Empirical constructs like ‘spiritual wellbeing’ and ‘spiritual distress’ are located in the realm of the value-laden and contested concepts of health, illness and mental disorder. In such constructs, developed and tested in a process of disambiguation, the travel of the concept of spirituality may temporarily come to a halt. But, through the use around the globe of questionnaires on spiritual matters, the travelling continues – both in the academic world and in the manifold social spheres in which patients and their caregivers and relatives live. It is very unlikely that, in the course of these travels, the meaning of spirituality will remain stable.

Therefore, research in the field of health-related spirituality must free itself from the illusion of universally valid concepts with stable meanings, or to put it more positively: the travelling and the transformations of spirituality are part of the object to be studied. This is not an argument against the construction and use of questionnaires for research on spiritual care. It is, rather, a plea for a more self-reflexive interdisciplinary research which ‘defies tendencies towards homogenisation and universalization’ (Neumann and Nünning 2012, 7). An improved understanding of the many pasts and the distinct current usages of ‘spirituality’ could contribute to a better perception and understanding of the fluid, emergent and sometimes contradictory phenomena related to this term.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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