

# *Spirituality/religion and suicide*



Dr. Erminia Colucci

[ecolucci@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:ecolucci@unimelb.edu.au)



In pre-modern times, concerns related to illness and healing were often encompassed within the wider domain of a religious worldview and, in many cultures, healing was a sacred art (Bathgate, 2002).

The distinction between religion and spirituality has gained greater prominence since the 1960s (Dein, 2005).

Today, at least in the developed countries, Medicine, including Psychiatry, and in general Psychology, are secular disciplines. But in many parts of the world a holistic view of human being has survived (D' Souza, 2002). This is seen, for instance, in Chinese and Indian Medicine, in the healing arts of American Indians and among Indigenous Australian peoples.

The latter part of the twentieth century has seen a noticeable rise in interest in spirituality :

« Whilst people may be becoming less *religious*, it would be a mistake to assume from that that they are necessarily becoming less *spiritual* »  
(Swinton, 2001, p. 11).



# Importance of Spirituality/Religion

Some ways in which religiousness and spirituality may be connected to health outcomes:

- religiousness/spirituality provides supportive, integrative communities for their members;
- offers members a complex set of beliefs about God, ethics, human relationships, life and death, which are beneficial to health;
- may protect against disease, indirectly promoting healthy lifestyles (e.g. healthy diets or prohibition to smoke and use drugs);
- certain religious/spiritual practices affect physiological mechanisms and elicit relaxation responses.



■ Religion also helps patients to cope better with their illness:

The majority of 850 studies on religion and mental health reviewed by Koenig (2000) reported that religious people experience better mental health and adapt more successfully to stress.

In Sullivan's study (1993) half of the mental health services consumers indicated spiritual beliefs and practices as central to their successful struggle with severe mental illness.



Religion can be of such importance that some persons with mental health disorders frequently, and sometimes only, seek help from the clergy (Larson et al., 1988).

In D' Souza's study (2002), 79% of the psychiatric patients rated spirituality as very important and two-third of patients believed that spirituality helped them to cope with psychological pain. 82% of the patients thought their therapists should be aware of their spiritual beliefs and needs, whereas 69% reported that those spiritual needs should be considered by the therapist in treating their psychological illness.



# CAUTION!

Payne et al. (1991), in their review on religion and mental health, concluded that “religion as prevention” is a concept based on an illusion that one religion is as good as another, whereas some ways of being religious (e.g. intrinsically instead of extrinsically) are healthier than other ways.

It is more useful to ask “how” a person is religious rather than “whether” a person is religious (Payne et al., 1991): HOW DOES REL/SPIR INFLUENCES A PERSON’ S DAILY LIFE!

Furthermore, an interest in religious issues may be not shared by every patient and it is likely to be higher in more religious patients (Exline, Yali & Sanderson, 2000). In some cases, some negative associations between mental health and religion have been highlighted (Larson et al., 1992).

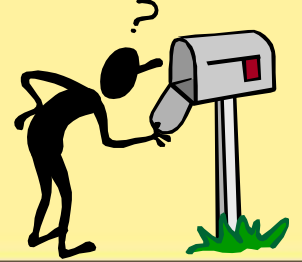




<<For many patients, spirituality is an important part of the wholeness, and when addressing psychosocial aspects in medicine, that part of their personhood cannot be ignored>> (Koenig, 2000, p. 1708)

Over recent decades, professionals in several sectors of health have suggested to give more importance to spirituality in the healing process and health models (e.g., D' Souza, 2002; Koenig, 2001; Marsella, 1999; Oldnall, 1995; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000; Underwood & Teresi, 2002).

# Neglect of spirituality/religion



<<To date Psychiatry has excluded spirituality apart from seeing it as a form of pathology or pathological response>>  
(Dein, 2005, p. 538)

- Review of research on religion in four major psychiatric journals from 1991 to 1995 (Weaver et al., 1998): only 1.2% of the 2766 quantitative research articles reviewed contained a religious/spiritual variable.
- Review of quantitative research studies published between 1992 and 1996 in five adolescent journals (Weaver et al., 2000): 11.8% of which reported a measure of religion.



# The lack of consideration of religion and spirituality is even more pronounced in Suicidology!

In Kehoe and Gutheil's evaluation of suicide assessment instruments (1994), the authors observed that, although the psychiatric literature suggests that religion and spirituality are significant and meaningful forces in suicidal patients, the number of religious items included on assessment scales approaches zero!

*«If we are to truly understand, study, and help people change, we must address issues that influence people's lives»* (Conway, 1989, p. 132)



# Colucci and Martin's review (2008)

## ■ Spirituality in Thought: Suicidal Ideation and Attitudes

Overall, studies have shown that religious factors are associated with lower suicidal ideation/plan and with more negative attitudes toward suicide. However, these findings have been not confirmed or disconfirmed by few others. Rarely research has focused on nonreligious forms of spirituality and meanings in life or has put religion/spirituality in relation to the ethno-cultural context.



# Colucci and Martin's review (2008)

## ■ Spirituality in Nonlethal Suicidal Behavior

Although a few studies have shown that religious/spiritual persons have lower rates of suicide attempts, a few others did not find any association between religiosity and suicidal behavior. Two studies suggested that in some circumstances religion might be a risk factor for such a behavior. Furthermore, research suggested that only some aspects of religiosity (e.g., importance of religion) or some spiritual variables (e.g., sense of connectedness or coherence) might be associated with suicidal behavior.



# Colucci and Martin's review (2008)

## ■ Spirituality in Lethal Suicidal Behavior

The majority of research has focused on mortality statistics and indicated that variables such as religious affiliation and church attendance offer some protection against suicide. However, a few studies illustrated the role of mediating variables and a few others reported absence of a significant association between suicide and religion. Furthermore, the epidemiological data have been questioned and one study showed that in some cases religiosity can support a suicide decision. Research on nonreligious spirituality or on essential aspects of religiosity/spirituality (i.e., meaning/purpose in life) are scarce.



## Colucci and Martin's review (2008)

- Findings about the influence of religion on suicide are inconsistent and ambiguous
- Not only has spirituality been overlooked by suicidologists, but the studies have typically been restricted to the analysis of the relationship between religiosity (often operationalized as church affiliation or attendance) and suicidal ideation/attitude or suicide mortality statistics
- Scarce use of qualitative methodology
- Very rarely have researchers addressed non-religious form of spirituality and meanings in life



# Colucci and Martin's review (2008)

## Migrants/refugees:

- Religious/spiritual factors were associated with lower rates of suicidal ideation in a sample of Latin American immigrants (Hovey, 1999).
- Religious/spiritual factors were associated with lower rates of suicidal plans and suicide attempts in a sample of depressive patients among Afghan refugees (Jahangir et al., 1998).





Large number of sociocultural indexes in sample of 87 nations



- Items measuring religious belief and behaviours such as "I believe in God" , "I'm a religious person", "I pray/meditate daily" or "I get comfort and strength from religion" were negatively correlated with suicide rates.



## *1: Cross-cultural meanings of suicide: A comparison between students in Italy, India, and Australia*

- Subjects - University students (18-24 years) from University of Padua (Italy), various colleges in Bangalore (India) and universities in Brisbane (Australia), with both parents of their same nationality. Around 250 p. (approx. equal gender) from each country, total sample of 686 (circa p. 200/country).
- P. were volunteers who received a questionnaire, a participant information sheet, a consent form for the questionnaire and another consent form for the focus groups.
- In each country, 4-5 groups were organized (average 8 p. each group, tot 96 p.), and 2 tape-recorded sessions for each group (total of 24 group sessions).



# Religion/spirituality and suicide

- Self-identified religious/spiritual p. across cultures had slightly ( $p < .10$ ) lower scores on the suicide risk scale (mean = 1.12 vs. 1.38) but, when considered by cultures, only in India these p. had significantly lower scores ( $p < .05$ ).
- Of these religious/spiritual p., those belonging to different faiths also had different mean scores on the suicide risk scale ( $p < .01$ ):

	Christian (non- Catholic)	Catholic	Islamic	Hindu	Buddhist	Spiritual beliefs	Other	
Total	1.24	<b>1.07</b>	<b>2.12</b>	<b>.96</b>	1.10	<b>2.00</b>	2.08	$p < .01$
Italy	1.50	<b>.87</b>	n.a.	n.a.	<b>2.20</b>	<b>2.00</b>	1.25	$p < .05$
India	<b>.25</b>	1.56	<b>2.12</b>	.96	<b>.00</b>	<b>2.00</b>	2.71	$p < .05$
Australia	1.37	1.26	n.a.	n.a.	.00	2.00	2.33	$p = \text{n.s.}$



# Attitudes towards suicide

■ There was also an association between self-reported religiosity/spirituality and attitudes towards youth suicide:

- When considered altogether, religious/spiritual p. expressed more negative attitudes ( $p < .001$ ) and less acceptability towards suicide ( $p < .001$ ) than non-religious/spiritual.
- When analysed separately by country, there were no statistically significant differences in India between religious/spiritual and non-religious/spiritual p., whereas in Italy religious/spiritual p. believed more strongly that suicide is preventable ( $p < .05$ ) and agreed less that it is acceptable ( $p < .05$ ). In Australia, religious/spiritual p. manifested more negative attitudes ( $p < .005$ ) and less acceptability ( $p < .01$ ).
- Scores on the subscales were also analysed looking at the specific religious affiliations, which significantly impacted the scores on each of the four attitude subscales.



# What keeps young people alive in spite of difficulties

- A few Italian p. cited religious concepts as protective against suicide- as a general faith or referring to God.
- Indians often cited religious concepts, usually expressed as the belief that life is God's and God has a plan for each person. This last concept could be linked to another theme that, with one exception in Italy, was mentioned only in India that is that we all have a destiny, a plan to fulfill.
- Religious beliefs were often cited by Australians.
- In India God was mentioned more often as a deterrent than in Italy and Australia.
- Projects and things, such as hobbies, which give meaning to life were mentioned in each country among suicide deterrents, although more by Italian and Australian p. than Indians.



## Other differences..

- When asked whom they would talk to if they were considering killing themselves, whilst few Italians and Australians would talk to a priest or spiritual guide, more Indians would talk directly to God.
- Spiritual/religious and not spiritual/religious p. ranked reasons for suicide partially differently.
- Differences also in focus groups, for instance in spiritual beliefs on the afterlife in general and about youth who die by suicide.





## *2: Cultural attitudes and meanings, religious/spiritual beliefs and suicide among young Indians*

- P. were volunteer University students, 17-25 years old, at-least second generation Indians (i.e. born in India with both parents born in India).
- The project was divided into two stages:
  - The first stage was based on a self-administered survey composed of the WHO-SRPB instrument (WHO-Spirituality, Religiousness and Personal Beliefs), questions on spirituality and religion, and a section on youth suicide (attitudes scale, open-ended questions and questions on previous experience and exposure);



- the second stage involved tape-recorded focus groups (active/creative tools) about religion/spirituality and suicide prevention.

■ 160 subjects (equally distributed by gender) took part in the first stage of the study. Of these, 42 volunteered to take part in focus group sessions (two tape-recorded sessions for each group).

The findings are under preparation for publication...

Short-documentary Haridwar: A spiritual journey





# Preliminary findings...

## What do you mean by spirituality?

- To improve myself (better person, full potential)
- To find trueness, values, meanings, and awareness
- To be connected with God/universe
- Well-being and positive feelings (e.g. peace, happiness, inspiration)
- Connection with other people.
  - *To be aware about myself, aware about the good things, values which improve our personality as well as other's personality, like a lamp which gives light to others (7f)*
  - *Spirituality is the way to know oneself. By assimilating spirituality in our life we can increase our potentials (21f)*
  - *(...)The union of soul and universal soul (God). Knowing one's purpose in life and carrying it out (22f)*
  - *(...)To sacrifice our selfishness is spiritual lifestyle (33f)*



# In what ways spirituality influences your life?

- Self-awareness, become a better person, improve oneself
- It helps to overcome life's difficulties
- Spirituality gives rules and practices for everyday life
- It gives energy and positive feelings (e.g. happiness, mental peace/balance, hope, strength, motivation, enthusiasm, self control, inspiration)
  - (...) when I feel own self tired against life problems, then true meaning of religion and spirituality gives us capability to struggle against life's difficulties (23f)
  - (...) Religion develops vision of unity among all the castes and oneness in god (36f)
  - It gives us strength. Spirituality gives us freedom from materialistic life (41f)



# Rituals and well-being?

- Spirituality contributes to well-being with spiritual practices that promote an health-oriented life style (Troyer, 1998)
- About one quarter of the p. in the survey stated that their spiritual beliefs furnished them with a set of practices to follow in the everyday life, for instance regarding diets, practices of yoga, and other health oriented activities while also helped them to avoid unhealthy behaviour.

Photos and short-doumentary  
[www.ermiphotoniac.weebly.com](http://www.ermiphotoniac.weebly.com)



# *WHOQOL Spirituality, Religiousness and Personal Beliefs (SRPB) Field-Test Instruments*

	Spiritual connection	Meaning in life	Experience of awe/wonder	Feelings of wholeness	Spiritual strength	Inner peace	Hope and optimism	Faith	Total SRPB
Mean	3,8	3,95	3,87	3,31	3,91	3,72	3,88	3,81	4
Median	4	4	4	3,31	4	3,75	4	4	4

5-points Likert scale: 1 is the lowest and 5 the highest.





### How important to you are your spiritual, religious and personal beliefs?

	Valid Percent
not important	,6
a little important	2,5
moderately important	12,6
very important	52,2
extremely important	32,1

### To what extent do you have inner peace?

	Valid Percent
not at all	1,3
a little	7,5
moderately	32,1
mostly	44,0
completely	15,1



### To what extent do you feel a sense of harmony in your life?

	Valid Percent
not at all	,6
a little	4,4
moderately	35,4
mostly	46,2
completely	13,3

### How able are you to remain optimistic in times of uncertainty?

	Valid Percent
not at all	,6
a little	8,8
moderately	39,4
mostly	37,5
completely	13,8



### Do your spiritual, religious and personal beliefs give meaning to your life?

	Valid Percent
not at all	1,2
a little	2,5
a moderate amount	19,4
very much	46,9
an extreme amount	30,0

### My religious/spiritual beliefs help me find a purpose in even the most painful and confusing events in my life

	Valid Percent
strongly disagree	1,2
disagree	2,5
neutral	3,8
agree	48,8
strongly agree	43,8



**To what extent do your spiritual, religious and personal beliefs help you to understand difficulties in life?**

	Valid Percent
not at all	
a little	2,5
a moderate amount	23,1
very much	50,0
an extreme amount	24,4

**To what extent do your spiritual, religious and personal beliefs give you the strength to face difficulties?**

	Valid Percent
not at all	
a little	4,4
a moderate amount	22,5
very much	45,0
an extreme amount	28,1

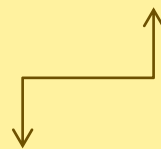


To what extent do your spiritual, religious and personal beliefs help you to overcome life's difficulties? Please, give some examples.

- *They provide spiritual/religious coping strategies (including religious and spiritual practices)*
- *Give strength*
- *Give positive feelings* (e.g. calm, peace, patience, determination)
- *Help to find meanings*
- *Provide with social support*
  - *my belief in God and my positive thoughts helped me in adjusting after my mother's death and live a normal live (2f)*
  - *when I dropped my education for one year because of my parents' disagreement about my education than I was very pessimistic and confused about my life. at that time only religious faith and personal belief helped me to overcome them (3f)*
  - *(...)God makes me understand that "each and every situation is teaching a lesson to us" (102f)*
  - *In II semester, I was very depressed and negative. Belief in God and one's self is only the reason why I am here today and I am very happy now (112f).*

## Do your spiritual, religious and personal beliefs contribute to your well-being?

	Valid Percent
not at all	0,0
a little	4,5
a moderate amount	26,9
very much	46,2
an extreme amount	22,4



- They help me to become a better person, improve myself
- They help me in difficult situations
- With religious and spiritual practices and lifestyle
- Social support (give and receive)
- It gives positive feelings and inspiration

*It shows me the right direction to live a better life, to refine myself, my actions and behavior, my ability*

*Gives me the strength to face problems*

*Religious practices (prayer, worship and religious rituals, etc. )*





Please describe what makes your life meaningful (or what would make it more meaningful)?

■ *Spirituality/religiosity (123 answers; 76,88%), e.g.:*

- To live spiritually, my spiritual beliefs, my spiritual practices (yoga, meditation)
- The continue search of the truth, living according to human being values and ideals



**To what extent do your spiritual, religious and personal beliefs help you to understand difficulties in life?**

	Valid Percent
not at all	
a little	2,5
a moderate amount	23,1
very much	50,0
an extreme amount	24,4

**To what extent do your spiritual, religious and personal beliefs give you the strength to face difficulties?**

	Valid Percent
not at all	
a little	4,4
a moderate amount	22,5
very much	45,0
an extreme amount	28,1



# Spirituality and suicide

*Why would you not suicide (or what would stop you from doing it) even if your life was horrible?*

■ **Spiritual/religious beliefs, practices, meaning/purpose in life, e.g.:**

- *The reason I will never commit suicide is that I understood the meaning of my life (18f).*
- *I will never commit suicide even if life becomes very dreadful because in this condition God, meaning spiritual power, will remain with us (93f)*
- *unshakable faith for Guruji is that infallible power which destroys thoughts of suicide before coming in my mind (116m)*
- *Because we don't feel any fear from difficulties, we are the students of D.S.V.V. and we are pupil of Guruji (160m)*



# Spirituality and suicide

*What should be done to prevent youth suicide in India?*

■ Spiritual/religious education, practices; attend a spiritual environment, e.g.:

- *They must be trained towards 'spiritual lifestyles' (15f)*
- *1) development of spiritual life 2) development of yogic life style by adopting yogic technique(...) (57m)*
- *they should understand meaning of life (80f)*

*If you were thinking about taking your own life, which kind of help would you more likely accept or will be looking for?*

■ Spiritual/religious practices (meditation, yoga, readings) or figure (guru, a spiritual person) or God, e.g.

- *I will talk to Guruji. He is not here but his literature will do our guidance. I will talk to them (94f)*
- *Gurudev and very few people of Gayatri mission (102f)*
- *My spiritual teacher (123m)*



Also in the FG there were several references to how spirituality/religion prevents suicide, for instance (FG4.2):

*M1: (...) the problem sent is by God, so he will send the solution as well;*

*F1: faith in God. He will do us good (...)*

*M2: belief in God that there will be good time again after sad time.*

*M3: According to Yoga theory, sutgun is a mental property that gives people wisdom and power of judgment. People who have sutgun do not commit suicide.*



# Spirituality and suicide

Religious/spiritual themes were also mentioned in questions related to:

- Reasons for youth suicide (e.g. lack of faith, materialism)
- Their own suicidality, e.g. *<<my belief in God made me overcome my thought of suicide. After that I never thought of it >> (2f)*
- And more...



**Do you feel life's difficulties or illness are a punishment for wrong doing?**

	Valid Percent
not at all	17,5
a little	23,4
a moderate amount	25,3
very much	22,1
an extreme amount	11,7

**There have been instances in your life where your spiritual, religious and personal beliefs have been a source of difficulties?**

	Valid Percent
not at all	40,3
a little	35,4
a moderate amount	10,4
very much	10,4
an extreme amount	3,5

a. Misunderstandings with family and friends for choosing a spiritual life

b. When you understand your life has changed, you are different from others (feeling isolated from, or against society)

c. When I have doubts about my faith. When I think God is punishing me for not having maintained my promises



# Future Directions

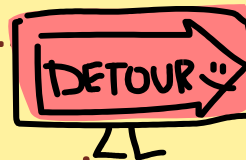
One of the reasons for the dearth of writing on the topic of spirituality and suicide may be related to the view that spirituality is necessarily and directly linked to religion

(Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2004):

Spirituality may well be significant to many people with mental health problems, even though they may not express an interest in or adherence to an established religious tradition (Swinton, 2001).



- First suggestion for future direction in research as well as clinical practice is to focalize on the broader concept of spirituality and.....



- do so increasing the use of qualitative methodology



# Future Directions

- There is the need to understand more -and more in depth- the relationship between suicide and spirituality.

This need was already discussed in Colucci (2008;2009) and Colucci and Martin (2008) and has been further demonstrated by the findings from these studies.

- It is also essential to understand spiritual guides' and traditional healers' roles, attitudes and strategies in regard to suicidal behaviour.



■ Explore the meaning that people from diverse cultural groups, socio-economic background and life experiences attribute to religiousness and spirituality, including migrants/refugees:

Researches should address the knowledge of the biopsychocultural roots of that experience generally named religious experience (Bartocci & Dein, 2005).

Necessity to recognize the many meanings attributed to religiousness/spirituality by different religious and cultural groups (Dein, 2005).





(cont.)



Thakker et al. (1999) criticize the literature for the absence of cross-cultural investigations of the relationship between religion and mental health and the fact that the few studies done have been mainly conducted on western populations.

Shafranske and Malony (1996) suggest that religion/spirituality needs to be considered like any other client's cultural characteristic and mental health professionals have an ethical obligation to consider spirituality a part of a standard assessment.



- More research to define which aspects of religiosity and spirituality are protective against suicide, because religious affiliation or simply attending church are not "necessary and sufficient" conditions to prevent suicidal behaviour.
- More research on meanings, meaning-making and meaning-finding.





More studies to clarify the less frequently found but clinically important harmful aspects of religion/spirituality (Larson & Larson, 2003).



DO NOT pathologize religiosity and spirituality and only pay attention to these constructs when they became part of a psychiatric problem.

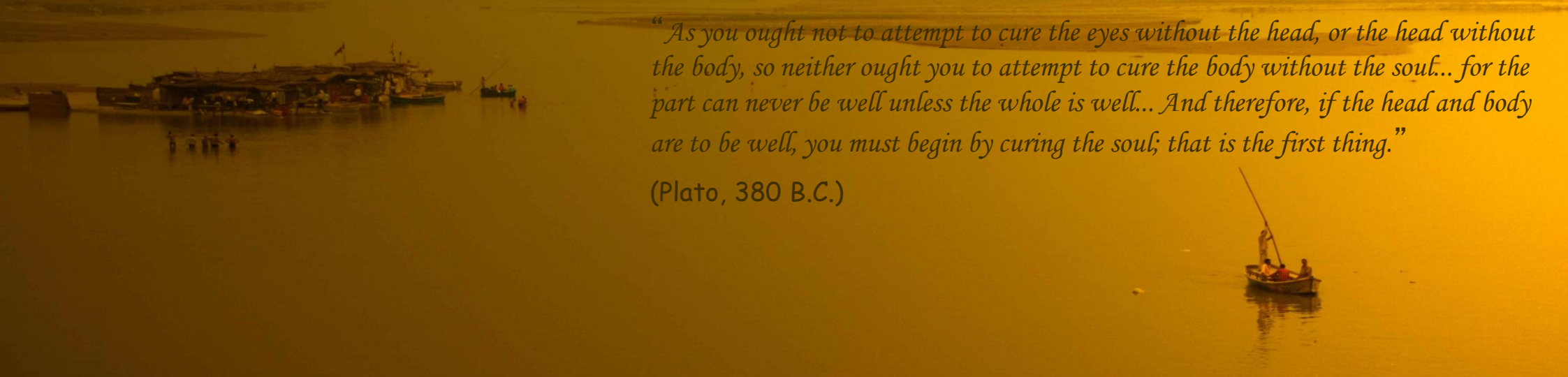
It is crucial to include the spiritual dimension routinely into prevention and intervention plans and in assessment and treatment of mental health patients (D'Souza, 2002).

This may particularly be important in suicidal patients, where topics such as meanings and purpose in life, sense of connection and coherence, system of values and beliefs are all often central issues in their suffering!



# Hope or illusion?

Albeit religious/spiritual issues have been generally overlooked in Suicidology (Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2004; Greening & Stoppelbein, 2002; Kehoe & Gutheil, 1994), in recent years there has been a growing interest in the role religion and spirituality may play in reducing self-harm and suicidal behaviour (Resnick et al., 1997) and awareness that people's choice to live or to die is highly related to aspects of their spiritual life (Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2004).

A serene sunset scene over a body of water. In the foreground, a small boat with two people is visible on the right. In the background, a pier or dock structure extends into the water on the left. The sky is a warm orange-yellow, and the water reflects the light.

“As you ought not to attempt to cure the eyes without the head, or the head without the body, so neither ought you to attempt to cure the body without the soul.. for the part can never be well unless the whole is well.. And therefore, if the head and body are to be well, you must begin by curing the soul; that is the first thing.”

(Plato, 380 B.C.)

## Publications

Colucci, E. & Martin, G. (2008). *Spirituality and religion along the suicidal path*, Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour, Vol. 38 (2), pp. 229-244.

Colucci, E. (2008). *Recognizing spirituality in the assessment and prevention of suicidal behaviour*. World Cultural Psychiatry Research Review (WCPRR), Special issue: Suicide and Culture, Vol. 3 (2), pp. 77-95, ([http://www.wcpr.org/index-03\\_02.htm](http://www.wcpr.org/index-03_02.htm)).

Colucci, E., (2009), Cultural issues in suicide risk factor assessment, in Kumar, U. & Mandal, M.K., *Suicidal Behavior: Assessment & Diagnosis*, New Delhi: SAGE

Colucci, E., (in press), *Spirituality, religion and suicide*, in Pompili, M. (ed.) *Suicide: a Comprehensive Perspective*", Bentham EBooks

## Contacts

Erminia Colucci: [ecolucci@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:ecolucci@unimelb.edu.au) or [fera\\_76@hotmail.com](mailto:fera_76@hotmail.com)