

How Spirituality Is Incorporated in Police Work A Qualitative Study

By Ginger Charles, Ph.D.

What is it that drives someone to become a law enforcement officer? Typically, people enter the profession with a strong desire to help others, find excitement, and discover who they are.¹ Relatively quickly, however, they realize that the “job” entails handling confrontations and crises, dealing with people who hate them for no specific reason, and feeling unappreciated for what they do. Many times, officers lose themselves in anger, succumb to the pressures on the street or with the police administration, or become bitter or cynical.² Those who completely lose faith and hope usually have their careers end in disease and self-destruction.³

However, most law enforcement officers are extremely resilient, demonstrating high levels of self-control, compassion, professionalism, and love for the work they have chosen. Their dedication to service can prove inspiring, revealing some of the noblest acts of self-sacrifice and altruism. These officers appear to have an ability to transform negative experiences, re-creating their emotionally charged frustrations into new meaning and compassion.⁴ The propensity to transcend negative experiences often can assist individuals move from feelings of victimization to viewing the experience as an opportunity for growth.⁵

The theme of spirituality remains relatively unexplored in law enforcement. In 1992, Kowalski and Collins conducted one of the major studies on faith and spirituality in the profession.⁶ Six officers told their stories about police work and their faith. While this study was not of rigorous design, it provided the first glimpse into police work and the topic of spirituality.

THE QUEST

The author conducted her exploratory research in 2004. She hoped to offer some insights into how spiritual practice affects law enforcement officers and their ability to police society, rather than focusing on how police work influences officers’ spirituality. In addition, the author wanted to learn whether officers could critically reflect on the trauma incurred in their work and then move toward finding meaning for destructiveness, pain, and suffering, thereby building a bridge toward compassion and peace.

Methods Used

Ten law enforcement officers from across the United States participated in the study. Each had a minimum of 5 years in the law enforcement culture, including significant exposure to traumatic events, human destructiveness, and suffering, and at least 5 years within a spiritual practice (e.g., prayer and meditation).

Defining spirituality to include all faiths and spiritual practices was important. Rothberg’s definition of spirituality as “involving doctrines and practices that help facilitate lived transformations of self and community toward fuller alignment with or expressions of what is ‘sacred’” proved

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Profile of Participants

Age	Sex	Marital Status	Title	Years of Service	Education
57	M	Married	Chief Investigator	33	B.A.
39	M	Married	Police Officer	14	B.S.
34	F	Single	Detective	9	M.A.
41	M	Married	Captain	23	B.S.
41	M	Married	Police Officer	7	B.S.
41	M	Married	Sergeant	18	B.A.
50	M	Married	Captain	27	B.A.
25	F	Single	Police Officer	5	A.A.
55	F	Single	Division Chief	32	M.A.
51	M	Married	Major	32	B.A.

appropriate.⁷ For the study, the author defined the term *spirituality* as what a person believes is sacred and how that individual aligns with that sacredness. The concept of spirituality included all spiritual paths, not only Christian perspectives.

The author used semistructured interviewing, designed to explore the expression of spirituality as revealed by the officers in their work. This particular method of narrative inquiry allowed the participants to “tell their stories.”⁸ The author asked the officers eight standardized, open-ended questions.

- 1) When did you become a law enforcement officer and why?
- 2) Tell me your spiritual history starting with your parents.
- 3) Describe your spiritual practice.
- 4) Tell me about your work as an officer.
- 5) Has your spirituality influenced your work as an officer?
- 6) What has been most challenging to you while working in a profession where you are constantly exposed to human destructiveness and suffering?

7) How have you changed as an officer?
How has your spirituality helped?

8) How do you cope with the human destructiveness and suffering encountered in police work? What is your support system when you are overwhelmed?

Additionally, the author probed beyond this formal set of questions to extract further insights and meaning from the participants. This approach provided a loose structure and an opportunity for the officers to tell their stories.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then given to the officers to clarify or correct any discrepancies. Upon approval of the transcripts, the author examined and reviewed each interview to identify common themes that emerged. The presence of the actual voices of the officers as they described the phenomenon under investigation added strength to the study and highlighted the importance of including portions of their narratives to bring the research to life.

Results Found

The responses to the interview questions presented a living perspective from a group of law

enforcement officers about their relationship with spirituality, the world around them, their professional culture, and their growth. The three core themes—spiritual philosophies and practices, relationships creating humanistic approaches to service, and spiritual responses to human destructiveness—that emerged were distinct yet interwoven, demonstrating that spirituality penetrated all areas of the officers’ lives, and all were clearly important.

Spiritual Practices

All participants stated that their faith centered in Judeo-Christian beliefs and that prayer constituted their main form of spiritual practice. They believed that this was a private connection

with God, a personal conversation. One officer reflected, “I have the same prayer every night, and I’ve said it over and over. It’s just to help me do my best, to give thanks for what I have, thanks for my wife. When we would have a homicide during the day, I would go back to the house, park in front of it, and say a little prayer for the victim that I hope he or she is okay and in a better place.”⁹

Eight out of the 10 officers went to church regularly as another form of spiritual practice. Half also attended weekly Bible study, stating that it represented another way to experience a sense of community and a time to minister to others. One officer said, “Going to church is not just experiencing but it’s walking the talk. It’s taking what you’ve learned from the past, what you’ve read, or what God has shown you and living those lessons during the week.”¹⁰

Two officers discussed the importance of being in nature as a spiritual practice. One advised, “I just had this deep feeling or movement from the mountains. And, I still feel it. I love the high country. It just nourishes my soul.”¹¹ Another officer described his running as a meditative practice, “I can think about things. I reflect a lot. I truly just let my mind go. I look around and sense the beauty around me.”¹²

Human Relationships

The primary purpose of relationships for the officers included the necessity of being connected with other human beings, recognizing the humanness in all individuals, and realizing the opportunities for finding meaning in their work through compassion and integrity. One officer said, “Regardless if you’re a victim, witness, or suspect, you still are part of humanity, and you still have some basic rights as a human being.”¹³ Finally, for all of them, their spirituality provided the ability to acknowledge that there exists a larger plan as designed by God. They then could “surrender” to that plan, appreciating that they made a difference in their work, whether they knew it immediately.

Themes That Emerged	
Core theme	Spiritual philosophies and practices
Subthemes	Spiritual practices: prayer Spiritual calling to police work Spiritual ethics
Core theme	Relationships creating humanistic approach to service
Subthemes	Spiritual maturity in policing Compassionate service Coping in police culture
Core theme	Spiritual responses to experiences of human destructiveness
Subthemes	Experiences with human destructiveness and suffering Closeness to death Experiences of evil: God’s justice versus earthly justice

Spiritual Responses

The officers described maintaining a discipline of prayer as a way of connecting with God. This practice afforded each a “moral compass” to lead them beyond the pain and destructiveness encountered in police work. One officer offered his feelings about service, “What I love most about police work is seeing humanity at its core. I don’t consider any of that to be challenging. I consider all of that to be a gift. You can meet each person right where he or she is.”¹⁴ Another officer noted the importance of spiritual integrity, “I think the most important thing you bring to the job is your ethics and your character. I just think it’s in your heart, and you’ve got to have a moral compass that just always points in the right direction no matter how bad the seas are around you. The compass has got to be always true, and you either have it or you don’t. You’ve got to dedicate yourself to it, and you’ve got to have sound moral principles.”¹⁵

CONCLUSION

The author’s study explored how law enforcement officers incorporate spirituality in their work. The results suggested that spiritual beliefs are significant in assisting officers in their work, relationships, and health. Participating officers spoke clearly about how their spirituality has kept them from succumbing to the pressures of their work, especially in relation to the human destructiveness and suffering witnessed within their profession. However, these officers represent a very small percentage of the police culture across the United States, and, therefore, it is imperative to continue further research into spirituality as a resiliency factor in the law enforcement profession.

Little research existed with which to compare this study at the time it was conducted. Hence, as with any exploratory research, it generated more questions than answers. Consequently, further inquiry into the issue of how spirituality is incorporated in police work must be undertaken.

To do so can provide additional answers applicable to the wider perspective of police work and spiritual practice. It is the author’s hope that her study was not an anomaly, but, rather, a glimpse at an emerging police culture that embodies spiritual qualities, such as empathy, compassion, integrity, humanism, and love for all humankind. For all law enforcement officers throughout the world, along with the communities they have sworn to protect and serve, such hope must not remain in vain. ♦

Endnotes

¹ C. Figley, “Police Compassion Fatigue (PCF): Theory, Research, Assessment, Treatment, and Prevention” in *Police Trauma: Psychological Aftermath of Civilian Combat*, ed. J. Violanti and D. Paton (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1999), 37-51; and *Police Trauma: Psychological Aftermath of Civilian Combat*, ed. J.M. Violanti and D. Paton (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1999).

² *Ibid.*; and I. Carlier, “Finding Meaning in Police Traumas” in *Police Trauma: Psychological Aftermath of Civilian Combat*, ed. J.M. Violanti and D. Paton (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1999), 227-233.

³ Ginger Charles, “How Spirituality Is Incorporated in Police Work: A Qualitative Study” (PhD diss., Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, 2005).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ D. Rothberg, “Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism” in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. R. Forman (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 163-200; and R. Walsh, *Essential Spirituality* (New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, 1999).

⁶ J. Kowalski and D. Collins, *To Serve and Protect: Law Enforcement Officers Reflect on Their Faith and Work* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg/ACTA, 1992).

⁷ D. Rothberg, “The Crisis of Modernity and the Emergence of Socially Engaged Spirituality,” *ReVision* 15, no. 3 (1993): 105-114.

⁸ M. Miles and A. Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 47.

⁹ Charles, 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹² *Ibid.*, 104.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

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