

Spirituality:

The Search for the Sacred¹

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Preprint: *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*

Edited by C. R. Snyder, S. J. Lopez, L. Edwards, & S. C. Marquest

New York: Oxford University Press.

¹Portions of this chapter were adapted from Pargament, K. I. (2007). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred*. New York: Guilford Press.

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the growing literature on spirituality. Spirituality is defined as a search for the sacred. The term “search” indicates that spirituality is a process, one that involves efforts to discover the sacred, hold onto the sacred once it has been found, and transform the sacred when necessary. The term “sacred” represents the substantive unique characteristic of spirituality. At its core, the sacred includes concepts of God, of the divine, and of transcendent reality. Other aspects of life (e.g., marriage, work, self, time, community) can also be viewed as sacred by virtue of their association with this sacred core. Spirituality is a process that unfolds in different ways over the entire lifespan depending on a unique blend of biological, social, psychological, situational, and transcendent forces. Whether spirituality is helpful or harmful depends on the degree to which it is well-integrated. At its best, spirituality is broad and deep, responsive to life’s situations, nurtured by the larger social context, capable of flexibility and continuity, and oriented toward a life-enhancing destination. At its worst, spirituality lacks scope and depth, clashes with the surrounding social system, changes and shifts too easily or not at all, and misdirects the individual in the pursuit of spiritual value. Building on the recognition that spirituality offers a distinctive set of resources for living, social scientists and health professionals have begun to develop spiritually integrated clinical interventions, with some promising results.

Key words: religion, spirituality, transformation, integration, psychotherapy

To the founding fathers of psychology, spiritual phenomena represented critically important topics for psychological study. Since the early part of the twentieth century, however, psychologists have tended to: (1) ignore spirituality; (2) view spirituality as pathological; or (3) treat spirituality as a process that can be reduced to more basic underlying psychological, social, and physiological functions. Fortunately, this situation has begun to change (Weaver, Pargament, Flannelly, & Oppenheimer, 2006), for several good reasons. First, spirituality is a “cultural fact” (cf. Shafranske & Malony, 1996): the vast majority of Americans believe in God (90%), engage in prayer (90%), and feel that religion is very important or fairly important to them (84%) (Gallup, 2004; Poloma & Gallup, 1991). Second, as we will see, empirical studies have linked spirituality to a number of aspects of human functioning. Finally, in a more practical vein, the American Psychological Association has defined religiousness as a “cultural diversity” variable. Although it has received relatively less attention than other diversity variables, psychologists are no less ethically obligated to attend to this dimension and reduce potential biases in their professional work with clients of diverse religious backgrounds (see Principle D, Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct of APA, 1992).

In this chapter, we consider some of the intriguing findings that are emerging from the study of spirituality. Our review here will be selective rather than inclusive. We will discuss some of the ways that spirituality can be understood as another natural part of life. We will review some of the things we are beginning to learn from empirical studies of spirituality and its connections to well-being. Finally, we will illustrate some of the implications of spirituality for human functioning and positive psychology.

Defining Spirituality

Psychological definitions of spirituality are diverse, ranging from the best of that

which is human, to a quest for existential meaning, to the transcendent human dimension (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). Even though any single definition of this rich, complex construct is unlikely to satisfy everyone, some characterization is needed to provide boundaries and order to this literature.

In moving to a definition, it is particularly important to consider the relation between spirituality and religiousness. Traditionally, psychologists of religion did not distinguish between these constructs (Wulff, 1998). More recently, however, writers have begun to contrast the two, with some suggesting that religion is institutional, dogmatic, and restrictive, whereas spirituality is personal, subjective, and life-enhancing (e.g., Elkins, 1995; Emblen, 1992). Elsewhere, we have argued against this polarization of the two constructs. Empirical studies indicate that most people appear to define themselves as both religious and spiritual (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Moreover, both religion and spirituality can be expressed individually and socially, and both have the capacity to foster or impede well-being (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). In short, we believe there are important points of overlap between the two constructs. We prefer to use the term “religion” in its classic sense as a broad individual and institutional domain that serves a variety of purposes, secular as well as sacred. “Spirituality” represents the key and unique function of religion. In this paper, spirituality is defined as “a search for the sacred” (Pargament, 1999, p. 12).

There are two key terms in this definition: “search” and the “sacred.” The term “search” indicates that spirituality is a process, one that involves efforts to discover the sacred, hold onto the sacred once it has been found, and transform the sacred when necessary. People can take a virtually limitless number of pathways in their attempts to discover, conserve, and transform the sacred. What these diverse pathways share is a

common end -- the sacred.

In our view, the sacred represents the substantively unique characteristic of spirituality. At its core, the sacred includes concepts of God, of the divine, and of transcendent reality; although such concepts cannot be proven as scientifically or ontologically “true,” many people perceive one or more of these key elements as being real. As we have discussed at length elsewhere (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005) outside this core also can be viewed as sacred by virtue of their association with, or representation of, this sacred core. We refer to imbuing objects with divine significance and character as “sanctification” and through this process many objects become sacred, including time and space (the Sabbath, churches); events and transitions (birth, death); materials (wine, crucifix); cultural products (music, literature); people (saints, cult leaders); psychological attributes (self, meaning); social attributes (compassion, community); and, roles (marriage, parenting, work). We would describe persons as spiritual to the extent that they are trying to find, know, experience, or relate to whatever they perceive as sacred.

As Pargament (1999) has noted, this view of spirituality is broad enough to cover both traditional, theocentric, institutionally-based spiritual expressions and non-theistic expressions that take place outside of traditional religious institutions, beliefs, and practices. The definition of spirituality, however, offers a basis for distinguishing between this construct and related phenomena. Unlike other psychological attributes, spirituality is centered around perceptions of the sacred. It overlaps with other human processes, many of which are described in this book (e.g., creativity, wisdom, forgiveness, meaning, hope, humility), only to the extent that they represent pathways to the sacred or become sacred in and of themselves. Of course, as we will see, many seemingly secular objects do, in

fact, become sacred and, when they do, they become relevant topics for the study of spirituality. With this definition in mind, we now turn to the processes that are critical to spirituality.

Spiritual Processes

Discovery

The search for the sacred is dynamic, rather than static, evolving rather than fixed. As Figure 1 shows, it begins with the process of discovery, oftentimes in childhood. “How young we are when we start wondering about it all,” Robert Coles (1990, p. 335) concluded from his study of the spiritual lives of children. Although some have questioned the child’s capacity to grapple with religious abstractions (Goldman, 1964), social scientists have presented rich anecdotal accounts of children who appear to be engaged in a search for God. Consider the words of a nine-year old boy:

I’d like to find God! But He wouldn’t just be there, waiting
for some spaceship to land! He’s not a person, you know!
He’s a spirit. He’s like the fog and the mist. Maybe He’s
like something -- something we’ve never seen here. So how
can we know? You can’t imagine Him, because He’s so
different -- you’ve never seen anything like Him. . . I should
remember that God is God, and we’re us. I guess I’m trying
to get from me, from us, to Him with my ideas when I’m
looking up at the sky! (Coles, 1990, pp. 141-142)

Social scientists have offered a variety of explanations for the propensity to seek the sacred. Some have suggested that there is a genetic basis for spirituality (e.g., Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal, & Tellegen, 1990). Others have emphasized that

conceptions of God are rooted in the child's intrapsychic capacity to symbolize, fantasize, and create super-human beings (Rizzuto, 1979). Some have asserted that spirituality grows out of critical life events and challenges that expose human limitations and reveal a transcendent reality beyond the self (Johnson, 1959). Others have emphasized the importance of the social context (familial, institutional, cultural) in shaping the child's understanding of God (Kirkpatrick, 2005). And still others maintain that the spiritual capacity is basic to human character (Loewald, 1978).

Shaped by internal and external factors, perceptions of the sacred take many forms. In the United States, people hold diverse images of the divine, images that range from loving, kind, and forgiving to wrathful, strict, and controlling (Spilka, Armitas, & Nussbaum, 1964). As indicated previously, other aspects of life also can be sanctified; that is, perceived as manifestations of God or sacred in character (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). For instance, many parents perceive their children as blessings (Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, in press), others view the body as something holy (Mahoney et al. 2005), and many describe love as eternal (see Hendrick & Hendrick chapter in this volume). In short, people are able to discover the sacred in many parts of life, or life in its entirety.

Conservation

Figure 1 indicates that the search for the sacred does not end after it has been discovered. Once found, people strive to hold on to the sacred. Although social scientists generally have viewed religion and spirituality as mechanisms that help people maintain themselves physically, psychologically, and socially, the ultimate purpose of spiritual involvement for the religiously minded is not exclusively biological, psychological, or social (Pargament, 1997). Spiritual persons are, instead, concerned with developing,

maintaining, and fostering their relationship with the sacred.

There is no shortage of examples of the human desire to hold onto the sacred, even at terrible costs. In a book aptly titled “With God in Hell,” Berkovits (1979) illustrates the great lengths many Jews went to to preserve their faith in the ghettos and concentration camps of World War II. One Jewish couple hurried to complete a ritual circumcision of their newborn son as the Gestapo were breaking into their homes to take them away, with the mother shouting “Hurry up! . . . They have come to kill us. At least let my child die as a Jew” (p. 45). Consistent with this example, researchers have found that levels of faith, and religious beliefs and practices are largely unchanged or even strengthened following traumatic events, such as accidents (Bahr & Harvey, 1979), war (Allport, Gillespie, & Young, 1948), and death of loved ones (Balk, 1983).

There are a number of spiritual pathways that conserve the individual’s relationship with the sacred. Spiritual pathways include social involvements that range from traditional religious institutions to nontraditional spiritual groups, programs, and associations (e.g., Twelve-Step, meditation centers, Scientology). Pathways involve systems of belief that encompass those of traditional organized religions (e.g., Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim), newer spirituality movements (e.g., feminist, goddess, ecological spiritualities), and more individualized world views. Pathways also are made up of traditional religious practices that include prayer, bible reading, watching religious television, and rites of passage, as well as other human expressions that have as their goal the sacred, including yoga, music, art, and social action (see Streng, 1976). In addition to these day-to-day forms of spiritual involvement, people can draw on a number of spiritual coping methods to help them conserve the sacred when it is threatened or violated, including spiritual support, purification rituals,

and spiritual meaning-making (see Pargament, 1997; Pargament & Ano, 2005 for reviews).

Transformation

Perhaps because of their involvement in these spiritual pathways, people demonstrate remarkable spiritual resilience. Nevertheless, Figure 1 shows that individuals experience internal or external events and transitions over the course of their lives that can be quite spiritually disorienting. As a result, they may struggle with whatever they hold sacred, with their system of spiritual beliefs, or with their religious communities. Spiritual struggles of these kinds have been linked to poorer mental health, physical health, and even greater risk of dying (see Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005). To resolve these struggles, transformation in the way the sacred is understood and experienced may be necessary.

Spiritual methods are available to facilitate this process of change (see Pargament, 1997 for a review). For example, religious rites of transition help people prepare for the deaths of those they hold most dear, acknowledge the loss, ease the deceased into the afterlife, incorporate the spiritual essence of the loved one into the inner experience of the survivors, and encourage the survivors to find new sources of sacred value in their lives once again. Spiritual conversion represents another transformational method in which those confronted by the limitations of their own self-contained worlds incorporate a sense of the sacred into themselves. The result is a fundamental change in the individual's self-definition, view of the world, and sense of purpose in life (see Paloutzian, 2005). Following transformation, the individual engages once again in efforts to conserve his/her new understanding of the sacred.

Not all attempts at transformation are necessarily successful, as Figure 1

indicates. The individual may be unable to find a new way to approach the sacred and disengage from the spiritual quest. Although some disengage permanently, others re-discover the sacred later in life and enter once again into the search for the sacred.

The process of discovering, conserving, and transforming the sacred is the essence of spirituality. It does not begin and end in childhood, nor does it conclude in early adulthood. It is a cycle that unfolds in different ways over the entire lifespan depending on a unique blend of biological, social, psychological, situational, and transcendent forces.

Spiritual Integration and Dis-Integration

Generally, involvement in the search for the sacred is associated with beneficial outcomes. People who pray and meditate more often, attend church more frequently, experience a greater sense of connectedness with the sacred, draw more on various spiritual methods of coping to deal with problems, and see the world through a sacred lens experience better health and well-being (see Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Pargament, 1997; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). But there are important exceptions to the rule; malignant spiritual expressions resulting in self-degradation, suffering, bigotry, and violence. Though spirituality speaks to the highest of human potentials, it also has been implicated in the lowest. Spirituality, in short, is not necessarily “good.” People can take destructive as well as constructive spiritual pathways in the search for destructive or constructive representations of the sacred.

How do we determine whether spirituality is constructive or destructive? It would be overly simplistic to define the highest form of spirituality by a single belief, practice, emotion, or relationship. Instead, the most elevated form of spirituality is well-integrated (see Pargament, 2002, in press). At its best, spirituality is marked by pathways that are

broad and deep, responsive to life's situations, nurtured by the larger social context, capable of flexibility and continuity, and oriented toward a sacred destination that is large enough to encompass the full range of human potential and luminous enough to provide the individual with a powerful guiding vision. At its worst, spirituality is dis-integrated, defined by pathways that lack scope and depth, fail to meet the challenges and demands of life events, clash and collide with the surrounding social system, change and shift too easily or not at all, and misdirect the individual in the pursuit of spiritual value. Thus, depending on the degree to which spirituality is well-integrated or poorly integrated, an individual's spiritual trajectory may lead toward growth or decline (see Figure 1).

Consider a few examples.

Problems of Spiritual Destinations

Problems arise when people pursue "small gods;" that is, understandings of the sacred that leave people unable to come to terms with their own strengths and weaknesses and unequipped to face the full spectrum of life problems. On the one hand, exclusively harsh and punitive conceptions of God can interfere with the capacity to enjoy pleasures in life. These negative perceptions of the divine have been tied to higher levels of psychological distress (Exline & Rose, 2005). On the other hand, exclusively positive images of God as purely loving and protective may be difficult to reconcile with experiences of pain, suffering, and evil in the world. William James (1902) described this kind of "health-minded" religion as incomplete: "There is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth" (p. 160). Small gods who are seen by people as theirs and theirs alone can also pose problems for those who fall outside this sacred umbrella. For

example, in a study of 11,000 people from 11 European countries, people who believed that “there is only one true religion” were significantly more prejudiced against ethnic minorities (Scheepers, Gijsberts, & Hello, 2002).

Problems also arise when people form attachments to inadequate substitutes for the sacred in their spiritual quest. Listen, for example, to the way one man described his dissent into alcoholism: “As my alcoholism progressed, my thirst for God increasingly became transmuted into a thirst for the seemingly godlike experiences that alcohol induced. Alcohol gave me a sense of well-being and connectedness – and wasn’t that an experience of God? Alcohol released me from the nagging sense that I was never good or competent enough – and wasn’t that God’s grace” (Nelson, 2004, p. 31)? False gods can take many forms – food, drugs, alcohol, self, others. Whatever its form, though, idolatry generally breaks down because the object of worship is unable to bear the full weight of the divine qualities that have been projected onto it.

Problems of Spiritual Pathways

In the search for the sacred, people encounter difficulties when their spiritual pathways lack breadth and depth. For example, people with a less extensive history of spiritual involvement are less likely to find spirituality helpful to them in difficult times. As Wink and Dillon (2001) put it: “Long-term investment in religious capital yields dividends that can compensate for subsequent declines in other human stock” (p. 102). Other studies have shown that a deeply internalized spirituality is tied to mental health benefits, unlike spiritualities motivated out of guilt or external pressures (Ryan, Rigby, & King, 1993). Finally, people who feel a more secure attachment to God report less psychological distress than those who describe a shakier attachment (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

Another set of problems occurs when the individuals’ spiritual pathways do not fit with their destinations, their life situations, or larger social context. For example, by

being overly scrupulous in the pursuit of spiritual goals, people can undermine the goals themselves, as in the case of a man who was so fearful of transgressing the injunction against praying when unclean that he spent too much time in the bathroom and missed his prayers entirely (Greenberg, Witztum, & Pisante, 1987). By failing to attend to the demands of situations, people can apply spiritual solutions inappropriately to life problems, as in the case of women who rejected medical help for lumps in their breasts and instead deferred the responsibility for the problem to God, with fatal consequences (Baider & De-Nour, 1987). And by virtue of their involvement in a larger unsupportive social context, people often experience considerable pain, as in the case of gay men and lesbians who report conflicts with the teachings of their traditions, prejudice from members and clergy in their congregations, and feelings of rejection, guilt, shame, and self-loathing (Schuck & Liddle, 2001).

Like other dimensions of life – physical, psychological, and social – spirituality is rich and complex. Over the course of their lives, people follow diverse spiritual trajectories, some leading toward growth and others toward decline. What determines the trajectory? Here, we have suggested that there is no single key to distinguishing spirituality at its best from spirituality at its worst. Whether spirituality leads to growth or decline is instead determined by a configuration of factors and the degree to which they operate in harmony with each other.

Conclusions and Implications

The capacity to envision, seek, connect and hold on to, and transform the sacred may be what makes us uniquely human. Spirituality cannot be reduced to purely biological, psychological, or social processes without distorting its essential character. Spirituality is an important human motive in and of itself (see also Emmons, 1999), one

that deserves much greater study. Of course, we cannot speak to the actual existence of the sacred as social scientists. We have no instruments to measure God, the divine, or transcendent reality. We can learn, however, about the variety of ways that people try to discover, conserve, and transform what they perceive to be the sacred. We also can distinguish well-integrated from poorly integrated forms of spirituality. And we can examine how the search for the sacred impacts peoples' lives.

Psychologists and other social scientists are beginning to learn that spirituality holds a number of important implications for human functioning. But the study of spirituality is only beginning. Researchers have tended to study spirituality "from a distance," relying on surveys that contain global, distal measures, such as whether the individual believes in God, how often he/she goes to religious services, how often he/she prays, and his/her self-rated religiousness and spirituality. To develop a deeper understanding of this process, we will need to study it closer-hand by getting to know spiritually-oriented people; learning about their world view, values, and relationships; participating in and observing their institutions and settings; and, examining the specific resources and methods of spirituality in much greater detail. It will be important to consider the full variety of spiritual pathways and destinations, not only those associated with traditional religious institutions, but also those tied to smaller, newer, culturally diverse, and non-traditional groups. Given the history of tension, antipathy, and misunderstanding between psychological and spiritual communities, research of this kind may be far from easy. Researchers need to gain some basic education in the psychology of religion and spirituality, and to examine their own preconceptions and attitudes toward spirituality before they engage in this type of study. And yet, research in this area may be well worth its initial costs and challenges, for the study of spirituality holds promise not

only for understanding a neglected dimension of life, but for practical efforts to help people enhance their well-being.

Spirituality offers, in some respects, a unique set of resources for living. As Pargament (1997) has noted elsewhere, much of psychology in the United States is control oriented. Making the unconscious conscious, increasing behavioral and cognitive control, and empowering the disempowered are hallmarks of an American psychology that tries to help people develop greater control over their lives. And yet, there are aspects of our lives that are beyond our control. Birth, developmental transitions, accidents, illnesses, and death are immutable elements of existence. Try as we might to affect these elements, a significant portion of our lives remains beyond our immediate control. In spirituality, however, we can find ways to understand and deal with our fundamental human insufficiency, the fact that there are limits to our control. Unfortunately, the language of spirituality -- the sacred, letting go, forbearance, suffering, faith, mystery, finitude, sacrifice, grace, and transformation -- is largely unfamiliar to psychologists. Even so, there may be much to be gained by bridging the worldviews, methods, and values of spirituality with those of psychology. Limitations and capacities are both a part of the human condition. After all, we grapple with both the possible and the impossible in any situation. Thus, a spirituality that helps us come to terms with our limits may complement rather than contradict a psychology that attempts to enhance our control.

Social scientists, health and mental health professionals already are starting to develop “psychospiritual interventions” that integrate spiritual resources into clinical practice. Spiritually-oriented approaches have been interwoven with rational-emotive, cognitive-behavioral, psychoanalytic, marital-family, and existential therapies (see Nielsen, Johnson, & Ellis, 2001; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Shafranske, 1996). Although

evaluations of the efficacy of these interventions are in short supply, initial results have been promising in several instances (e.g., Avants, Beitel, & Margolin, 2005; McCullough, 1999; Propst et al., 1992; Richards, Berrett, Hardman, & Eggett, in press; Worthington et al., 1996).

Researchers and practitioners also have begun to study a host of “virtues,” constructs that have clear roots in religious traditions, and apply these spiritually-related themes to preventive, educative, and therapeutic interventions (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, there is a burgeoning interest in the study of hope (Snyder, 1994; see also chapter in this volume), forgiveness (see McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; Worthington, 2005; see also chapter in this volume), love (Hazan, 2004; see Hendrick & Hendrick chapter in this volume), acceptance (Sanderson & Linehan, 1999), and serenity (Connors, Toscova, & Tonigan, 1999). In the future, psychologists should also turn their attention to “vices,” such as narcissism (Emmons, 1987) and evil (Baumeister, 1997; Peck, 1983). Helping people grapple with this darker side of spirituality represents another important direction for psychological practice. However, lest we slip back into a “negative psychology,” this focus needs to be balanced with an appreciation for the resource that spirituality represents for many people.

In our efforts to help people, we have to be especially sensitive to the diverse ways they experience and express their spirituality. In the search for the sacred, people take many different pathways toward many different destinations. As psychologists we must respect the full range of worldviews, practices, and communities that people form in their spiritual journeys. Perhaps the best antidote to our professional arrogance will come from a willingness to develop closer, collaborative relationships with spiritual individuals and

communities. We have much to learn from and about each other. With a relationship founded on mutual respect and trust, we may be able to pool our resources and extend our ability to enhance the well-being of people. And with a willingness to learn about, learn from, and work with each other, we may set the stage for a spiritually-enriched, positive psychology.

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Questions about the Future of the Topic of Spirituality:

- 1). How can psychologists foster greater tolerance for diverse spiritual pathways and destinations?
- 2). How can psychologists integrate a greater sensitivity to the spiritual dimension in their efforts to help people?
- 3). How can educators enhance the training of students in the area of spirituality?

Figure 1

