Religion, Spirituality, and Positive Psychology: Strengthening Well-Being

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Abstract

Views toward religion have long been highly polarized, particularly within the field of psychology, with many individuals viewing religion as either a solely constructive or destructive force. However, the increasing integration of religion and spirituality into psychological research and clinical practice has offered evidence that the picture is more complicated and that both positive and negative aspects are vital to a discussion of this topic. Aided in part by positive psychology topics, such as hope, forgiveness, gratitude, humility, resilience, and compassion, the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality has in recent years achieved a more balanced and nuanced approach to the role religion/spirituality can play in people's overall well-being and functioning. This chapter asserts that whether or not religion and spirituality serve primarily as a positive or negative force in people's lives depends largely on the kind of religion and the ways in which the individual interacts with and expresses that religion. We use a broad definition of religion and spirituality, focusing on their commonalities rather than their differences. In this way, we hope maintain a focus on the conversation at hand: religion/spirituality at its best, at its worst, and how religion/spirituality can be utilized to enhance social, psychological, physical, material, and spiritual well-being among diverse populations.

Keywords: positive psychology, psychology of religion; religion; spirituality

INTRODUCTION

Views toward religion have long been highly polarized, particularly within the field of psychology, where psychologists themselves show generally lower rates of religious belief and affiliation than the general public. In particular, both within and outside of psychology, many individuals view religion as a destructive force, ignoring its many positive implications and benefits. On the other hand, others view religion as essential to health and well-being, ignoring its potentially negative repercussions, such as those that arise for individuals who utilize negative coping strategies and experience spiritual struggles.

Over the last several decades, increasing attention has been given to the role of spirituality and religion in both mental and physical health. For example, from 1965 to 2000, there was a 727 percent rise in the average number of health-related research articles published per year dealing with spirituality (Weaver, Pargament, Flannelly, & Oppenheimer, 2006). Contemporary psychologists and other health care providers and scientists are also increasing their attempts to integrate religion and spirituality into their research and clinical practice. This interest takes a variety of forms and includes topic areas such as coping, prayer, meditation, spiritual modeling, religious attachment, spiritual transformation, sanctification, and the integration of spirituality within various forms of psychotherapy. In addition, the advent of the field of positive psychology has opened up certain religiously and spiritually relevant topics, such as hope (Berg, Snyder, & Hamilton, 2008; Vernberg, Snyder, & Schuh, 2005), forgiveness (Wade & Worthington, 2005; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007), gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), humility (Krause, 2010), resilience (Bonnano, 2004; Hobfoll et al., 2009), and compassion (Gilbert, 2005; Witvliet, Knoll, Hinman, & DeYoung, 2010) to increased psychological investigation. These trends have been accompanied by a more balanced and nuanced approach to the role that religion and spirituality can play in people's overall well-being and functioning (Pargament, Exline, Jones, Mahoney, & Shafranske, in press). Currently, there is ample empirical support for the position that religion and spirituality can serve as a positive force and as a negative force in people's lives.

In this chapter, we assert that whether religion is primarily a constructive or destructive force depends largely on the kind of religion we are considering and the ways in which the individual interacts with and expresses that religion. As a prelude to this discussion, it is critical to provide a definition of religion, and of its partner construct, spirituality.

DEFINING RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Historically, religion has been, and continues to be, defined in a variety of ways (see Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). Classically, religion was a broad-based construct involving beliefs, practices, relationships, and emotions that served a variety of purposes. More recently, religion has been defined more narrowly as an institutionally-based set of beliefs and practices and increasingly, religion has been contrasted with spirituality. In this comparison, religion has often been viewed as institutional, restrictive, ritualized, and negative in character in contrast to

spirituality which has been viewed as personal, freeing, spontaneous, and positive in character. However, this polarization has been critiqued and found to be inadequate (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). In particular, this polarization is needlessly constrictive, limits investigation within the field, and oversimplifies the complex, multi-dimensional, and overlapping nature of these concepts.

For simplification, in this chapter we will focus on the common ground involving religion and spirituality, rather than their differences. Specifically, we focus on religion and spirituality as they are involved in individuals' attempts to discover, sustain, and transform objects of significance in the individual's life (see Pargament, 2007). Generally, religion occurs within the context of institutions, beliefs, and traditions whose goal is the facilitation of this search, and, most importantly, the search for higher, spiritual ends. Spirituality refers specifically to the individual's search for a relationship with the sacred, which may or may not occur in an institutional context. Significance refers to any object of value to the individual, for example loving relationships, purpose in life, virtues, material success, and self-development. The sacred refers to any aspect of life which has been sanctified or deemed worthy of veneration, for example religious figures, leaders, or symbols, noble truths, and vocations. Both significance and the sacred may manifest themselves in a variety of dimensions of human life, including the social, psychological, physical, material, and divine. Using this broad definition helps to underscore the diversity of forms and functions of religious and spiritual experience and expression, and to avoid the polarized debate too often encountered in this field. In this way, we hope to maintain a focus on the conversation at hand: religion/spirituality at its best, at its worst, and how religion/spirituality can be utilized to enhance well-being among diverse populations.

RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY AT ITS BEST

In times of stress, people often draw on their religion and spirituality as vital resources for coping (Pargament, 1997). In religion and spirituality, people can find a variety of ways of understanding and dealing with challenging life situations. These religious and spiritual coping methods include benevolent religious reframing of negative situations, religious support, rites of passage, meditation and prayer, religious forgiveness, purification rituals, and conversion. Empirical studies have shown that these methods of religious coping are generally helpful to people and, moreover, they appear to predict outcomes above and beyond the effects of secular coping methods (Pargament, 1997, 2011). Religious resources serve a number of key psychological, social, and spiritual functions.

Community and Social Connection

Among the positive effects of religion is the sense of community, connectedness, and identity which it provides to participants. Nearly a century ago, Emile Durkheim, emphasized the social function of religion, stressing the communal activities and bonds which religious participation offers. In his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* he described religion as an "eminently collective thing" and gave special emphasis to the moral community (Church)

which religion creates (Durkheim, 1912/1954, p. 47). In addition to subjective reports of the benefits of religion's social functions, a number of research studies provide empirical evidence supporting the view that the social support and relationships which arise from participation in religious and spiritual community contribute to positive outcomes.

In particular, church attendance appears to be beneficial on a number of levels. For example, in a review and meta-analysis of 44 studies of healthy and 13 studies of diseased samples, Chida, Steptoe, and Powell (2009) found that religiosity and spirituality, measured primarily by involvement with a religious community, including church attendance, were correlated with decreased mortality rates among healthy samples. This was the case even after controlling for potentially confounding behavioral factors such as smoking, drinking, and exercising, as well as for socioeconomic status and social support in general. In particular, increased religious attendance (at least once a week) had a greater protective effect on mortality than organizational activity generally, suggesting that frequent attendance may be important in reducing mortality. Similarly, religious service attendance has been found to be associated with lower risk of developing major depression (Maselko, Gilman, & Buka, 2009) and to be a protective factor against suicide attempts (Rasic, Robinson, Bolton, Bienvenu, and Sareen, 2011).

Additionally, several studies by Krause suggest that church-based support confers health related benefits above and beyond those provided by secular support. In one study, Krause (2006) found that church-based emotional support reduced the effects of financial strain on health, but secular support from family and friends did not, suggesting that there is something unique about church-based social support, as distinct from similar support in the secular world. These stress-buffering effects were found among Blacks, but not among Whites. Similar results were found among older Mexican Americans (Kraus & Bastida, 2010). Specifically, church-based emotional support was linked with an increased sense of personal control and with better health. These studies, and others, suggest that the sense of community which comes from spiritual support may be especially beneficial to minority populations.

Self –Regulation and Self-Control

A second benefit of religion is its ability to help individuals learn self-regulation and self-control. Clearly, morality forms a central component of religions across cultures, as evidenced by moral codes such as Judaism and Christianity's Ten Commandments and Buddhism's five precepts, as well as the moral elements inherent in a number of religious concepts, including, notably, Heaven and Hell. An important function of religion, then, is to provide individuals with guidelines and support in developing the skills and ability to adhere to appropriate standards of moral conduct. Such self-regulation not only enhances individual well-being, but also has important benefits for interpersonal relationships and society as a whole.

Religion facilitates self-control in a variety of ways (for an overview, see Geyer & Baumeister, 2005). These methods of improving self-regulation include offering

clear instructions regarding right and wrong (e.g. commandments, precepts); providing motivation to engage in moral behavior (e.g. salvation, reincarnation, enlightenment); assisting in self-monitoring (e.g. prayer, meditation, confession); helping to manage temptation and inappropriate desires (e.g. gender segregation, celibacy); assisting in emotion regulation (e.g. by encouraging faith in God's benevolence or wisdom); enforcing beliefs about successful self-regulation (e.g. personal responsibility); and reinforcing guilt in order to teach lessons, prevent amoral behavior, and enhance pro-social actions.

Empirical studies support the regulatory function of religion as well. In particular, a recent review of the literature on religion, self-regulation, and self control (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009) found support for a number of hypotheses about the interrelationships among these factors. The authors showed evidence that religion promotes self-control, self-monitoring, and self-regulation, that religion influences the selection, pursuit, and organization of goals, and that some of the positive health outcomes of religion are likely due to self-regulatory functions. The authors also found preliminary support for these effects across a diversity of religions and cultures. In addition, a meta-analysis of 71 studies of personality correlates of religiousness across 19 countries (Saroglou, 2010) showed a relationship between religion and several personality variables, including conscientiousness, which is related to such traits as self-control and self-discipline. This relationship of conscientiousness with religion held across several dimensions, including religiosity, spirituality, and fundamentalism, suggesting that self-control may be important across a range of aspects of the religious experience. These findings were also consistent across age, gender, country, and religion.

Meaning and Meaning-Making

Another positive aspect of religion is its function as a source of meaning (for reviews, see Park, 2005, 2007). While meaning is certainly important in other fields, including psychology (e.g. Frankl, 1988; Wong & Fry, 1998), religion is distinctively concerned with ultimate values and sacred matters Indeed, for millennia, it has been primarily religion to which individuals turn in their efforts to seek and create meaning in their lives. Some have suggested that religion's ability to provide meaning at least partly accounts for its powerful and positive influence on health and well-being (George, Ellision, & Larson, 2002). A range of research has demonstrated an association between the meaning-making function of religion and well-being.

For example, several studies show an association of the meaning and peace aspect of spiritual well being with quality of life. In a study of two samples of patients with colorectal cancer, Salsman, Yost, West, and Cella (2011) found meaning and peace to be a more potent predictor of health-related quality of life than faith. While both facets were positively associated with all aspects of health quality (physical, social and emotional), faith was not a significant predictor of health quality when controlling for meaning/peace. Similar findings have been identified in other populations, including older adults (Homan & Boyatzis, 2010) and cancer patients (Edmondson, Park, Blank, Fenster, & Mills, 2008; Yanez, et

al., 2009). These findings suggest that religion and spirituality may produce their effects, in part, through the sense of meaning and peace they offer people.

In addition, other studies have shown significant relationships between the meaning making function of religion/spirituality and positive outcomes. For example, Mahoney et al. (2005) found that religion and spirituality appear to assist individuals in the pursuit of meaningful goals. In particular, spiritual strivings (sanctified meanings) were related to increased joy and happiness in a community sample of adults. Inzlicht, McGregor, Hirsh, and Nash (2009) even showed a biological relationship between religious belief, meaning-making, and reduced anxiety. In a study of the neural correlates of religious and secular meaning, they found a link between religious belief and activity in the anterior cingulate cortex, a brain system related to anxiety and self-regulation. Based on these findings, they suggest that religion helps prevent anxiety by providing meaning systems which inform behavior as well as predictions about oneself and the world.

The meaning making function of religion is also salient to Terror Management Theory (TMT). In regard to religion, TMT asserts that religion provides individuals with a particularly well-suited method for making sense of their inherent fear of their own mortality and of death. This is due to religious beliefs' often comprehensive nature, their promise of immortality, and the difficulty of disconfirming basic religious tenets (Vail et al., 2010). In particular, individuals with more intrinsic religiousness – who strive for meaning and value via religious belief rather than using religion for more utilitarian purposes (extrinsic religiousness) – show lower levels of fear of death (Jonas & Fischer, 2006). This increased intrinsic religiousness appears to serve a terror management function, particularly in the face of uncontrollable adverse events, including illness, death, and terrorism, and to mitigate the tendency for individuals to react negatively toward those with differing worldviews (worldview defense). The meaning-making function of religion thus has positive benefits in both the physical and psychological realms.

Comfort and Anxiety Reduction

Another function of religion and spirituality illustrated by terror management theory is that of emotional comfort and anxiety reduction. The meanings created by religion in particular can serve the additional function of buffering anxiety in the face of one's own mortality and death. Indeed many religious beliefs provide an alternate point of view that gives life purpose, value, and existence beyond the death of the body. This anxiety-reducing function of religion, especially as related to fear of death, is supported by a wealth of empirical studies (see Soenke, Landau, and Greenberg, in press).

In another particularly interesting qualitative study, Pevey, Jones, and Yarber (2008) directly asked dying patients with a range of medical conditions if and how religion brought them comfort. Many respondents directly acknowledged feeling comforted by their religious beliefs when facing death. In particular, they noted the importance of several specific aspects of their religion, including cosmic

order (the belief that God is in control), divine relations (having a personal relationship with God), and belief in an afterlife.

The idea of a comforting function of religion is not new. The relief from anxiety provided by religious belief was noted by early and eminent psychologists, including Freud, one of the first and most emphatic to stress the role of religion in alleviating anxiety (Freud, 1927/1961). In addition, contemporary psychological approaches such as attachment theory suggest that, like attachment to parents, attachment to God-figures can provide security and reduce distress (Kirkpatrick, 2005). This comforting and anxiety-reducing function of religion is an especially salient and long-standing example of the positive functions which religion and spirituality can serve.

Sense of Transcendence

Finally, the transcendent function of religion and spirituality provides an additional potential source of positive physical and psychological outcomes. Spiritual transcendence can be defined as "the capacity of individuals to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and place and to view life from a larger, more objective perspective . . . in which a person sees a fundamental unity underlying the diverse strivings of nature" (Piedmont, 1999, p. 988). This capacity for transcendence can contribute to enhanced well-being, above and beyond that predicted by personality factors. For example, Piedmont's Spiritual Transcendence Scale (STS) has been shown to uniquely predict a range of psychological outcomes, including perceived social support, interpersonal orientation, vulnerability to stress, self-actualization, purpose in life, and pro-social behavior (Piedmont, 1999, 2001).

The STS is particularly relevant to a cross-cultural discussion of religion and spirituality. In an attempt to identify aspects of spirituality common to diverse traditions, the scale was developed with input from theological experts from many faiths, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Lutheranism, Catholicism, Quakerism, and Judaism. As might be expected then, Piedmont's findings appear to hold cross-culturally as well. In an Indian study with Hindus, Christians, and Muslims, Piedmont and Leach (2002) found support for the utility of the STS with individuals from multiple faiths in an international context. The scale appeared to be internally consistent overall and was predictive of psychological outcomes, including positive affect, negative affect, and purpose in life, providing evidence of the universal nature of the transcendent aspect of spirituality.

A related line of research looks at the imbuing of significant objects with transcendent or sacred qualities. Numerous studies suggest that such "sanctification" produces positive benefits (see Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). For example, sanctification of strivings (Mahoney, 2005), marriage (Mahoney et al., 1999), nature (Tarakeshwar, Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2001), and sexual intercourse (Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005) have been shown to lead to positive outcomes, including greater meaning, commitment, and satisfaction, increased collaboration, and more investment of energy and resources. Findings from this body of research suggest that the imbuing of objects

with transcendent or sacred qualities has benefits that go beyond simple perceptions of objects as important (see Pargament, Magyar-Russell, & Murray-Swank, 2005) and beyond the benefits of general religiousness (DeMaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2010).

Similarly, research on meditation has found a range of beneficial effects for participants learning a spiritual versus a secular form of meditation. In a study comparing college students who learned a spiritual meditation technique to those who learned a meditation technique without a spiritual component (Wachholtz & Pargament, 2005), the former group showed lower anxiety and increased positive mood, as well as greater pain tolerance and greater spirituality. In a later study, Wachholtz & Pargament (2008) looked at migraine sufferers. Those who learned spiritual meditation showed greater decreases in the frequency of headaches, anxiety, and negative mood, and greater increases in pain tolerance, self-efficacy, spiritual experiences, and existential well being compared to those who learned a secular meditation. Thus, the transcendent component when added to meditation appears to provide positive benefits compared to meditation techniques which lack this element.

RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY AT ITS WORST

Despite the many positive effects of religion and spirituality, it would be short-sighted to neglect the negative consequences of some forms of religious and spiritual expression.

Hatred Toward Outgroups

One harmful effect of religion is its role as a source of hatred toward those outside of a particular religious tradition. Although it is important to note that many elements of this discussion can apply outside of religious contexts, outgroup hatred is unfortunately no stranger to religious groups. Despite clear evidence of this phenomenon across gender, age, national, racial, ethnic, and political lines, outgroup hatred can be particularly insidious when it arises from within a distorted or disintegrated religious context, in which religious tenets and beliefs are used in hurtful, rigid, discriminatory, or even aggressive ways. This is especially relevant to discussions of terrorism and violence.

Clinical psychologist of religion, James Jones, suggests that terrorism is fueled by fanatical religions that increase feelings of shame and humiliation, which in turn create aggression that is then unleashed on outsiders (Jones, 2006). Such religions systems often user war-like imagery, in which one or more outgroups are cast as violators of what is sacred and enemies to be defeated, through any means necessary, including violence. In addition, such negative portrayals of religion often have an apocalyptic mind-set, in which "evil" is to be defeated, purified, and transformed. These visions are generally violent, destructive, sacrificial, and deadly. They are often fueled by images of an angry, vengeful, overpowering, and punishing God-figure.

Similarly, James Waller (in press) relates religion and violence (in particular, genocide) to a number of features often central to institutional religion. These include obedience to authority, ritualized conduct, and, especially, an us-them

distinction between believers and non-believers. These characteristics make it easier to vilify those who are different and to more easily justify, or even reward, a range of horrible actions. In addition to the more familiar connection between Church and atrocity known to exist in the Holocaust, Waller cites linkages between these negative aspects of religion and a range of other violent acts supported by the Church, its followers, and its representatives, including those perpetrated during the Rwandan, Cambodian, and Bosnian genocides. These ties to violence cross denominational boundaries, with numerous examples from both Catholic and Protestant traditions.

Finally, a number of studies looking at the concept of sacred violation (desecration) have found this type of appraisal to be related to more negative views toward outsiders. For example, college students who considered the 9/11 attacks to be a desecration of something sacred were more likely to endorse extreme retaliatory acts toward the perpetrators (Mahoney et al., 2002). Likewise, Christians who consider non-Christians to be desecrators of their faith have been shown to hold stronger anti-Semitic (Pargament, Trevino, Mahoney, & Silberman, 2007) and anti- Muslim (Raiya, Pargament, Mahoney, & Trevino, 2008) attitudes. Thus, the vilification of those who fall outside one's own religious group can yield a range of aggressive and insidious effects, varying from the bias and hostility seen in desecration studies to the murder and genocide found in multiple contexts during times of war.

Religion as a Source of Struggle and Despair

An additional source of problematic outcomes arising from religion relates to spiritual struggles – difficulties and distress that arise from individuals' encounters with religion and spirituality (for an overview, see Exline & Rose, 2005). Spiritual struggles can be defined as "efforts to conserve or transform a spirituality that has been threatened or harmed" (Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005, p. 247). Such struggles often arise in the face of various life problems, including accidents, illnesses, abuse, crime, natural disasters, and other traumas. They express uncertainty or conflict about matters relating to God, faith, or spiritual relationships. Specific spiritual struggles can include anger toward God, struggles with personal sin, perceived spiritual attacks (e.g. harm or possession by evil forces), and social problems within religious institutions (e.g. sexual abuse by clergy, misogyny or homophobia within the Church).

Such spiritual struggles have consistently been shown to be associated with a range of negative psychological effects. For example, a meta-analysis of 147 studies looking at the relationship between depression and religion showed that spiritual struggles were related to increased levels of depression (Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003), despite beneficial effects of religiousness on depression generally. In another meta-analysis of 49 studies looking at religious coping and psychological outcomes, spiritual struggles were associated with increased depression, anxiety, and distress (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005).

Although most of the early research on the topic of spiritual struggles looked primarily at anxiety and depression outcomes, more recently researchers have

examined the relationship between spiritual struggles and other forms of psychopathology. For example, McConnell, Pargament, Ellison, and Flannelly (2006) found an association between spiritual struggles and a range of other psychological symptoms, including paranoid ideation, obsessive–compulsiveness, and somatization. These relationships were significant even after accounting for demographic and religious variables, suggesting that the negative implications of spiritual struggles are far-reaching. Thus, this negative element of religion may affect individuals not just at the level of values and beliefs, but may also exacerbate their difficulties through increased psychological distress, impacting their overall health and well-being in profound ways.

Significantly, longitudinal studies also support the relationship between spiritual struggles and poorer health and suggest a causal link. For example, Pirutinsky, Rosmarin, Pargament, and Midlarsky (2011) found a relationship across time between religious struggle and increased anxiety and depression among Orthodox Jews. An analysis using Structural Equation Modeling suggested a causal link whereby negative religious coping predicted future depression. Similarly, Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, and Hahn (2001) found a longitudinal relationship between increased religious struggles and greater risk of death over two years among ill elderly adults. Clearly, the difficulties and distress which can arise from spiritual struggles are associated with a range of negative effects both in the short and long term.

Rigidity, Authoritarianism, and Prejudice

Finally, certain forms of religious belief and religious expression appear to be linked to rigidity, authoritarianism, and prejudice. Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), as defined by submission, aggression, and conventionalism, is sometimes used to describe individuals who experience little doubt or questioning about their religion throughout their lifetime, and who report that they attend church, pray, and read scripture more frequently than most individuals (Altemeyer, 1981). RWA in North Americans has been linked to punitive child rearing, longer jail sentences, and prejudice against a range of minority groups, including Blacks, Hispanics, Arabs, Asians, Jews, homosexuals, feminists, and "radicals." In a series of five studies, Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992) found that fundamentalism (the belief in one fundamental, correct, inerrant set of religious teachings which must be followed in order to have a special relationship with God and to oppose forces of evil) is closely linked to such authoritarian beliefs, including prejudice against outsiders, submission to authority, and more aggressive punishment of lawbreakers.

More recently, in a meta-analysis of 55 studies looking at the relationship between religion and racism, Hall, Matz, and Wood (2010) found that increased religious identification, extrinsic religiosity, and religious fundamentalism were associated with higher levels of racism. However, the significant correlation between fundamentalism and racial prejudice disappeared when authoritarianism was controlled for, suggesting that religious prejudice indeed arises primarily in response to authoritarian beliefs. In addition, expressed racism showed a decline in

more recent years for individuals whose religious beliefs stemmed from fundamentalist values such as conformity and tradition. A more nuanced explication of this phenomenon comes from Laythe, Finkel, and Kirkpatrick (2001). In two separates studies, they found that when controlling for the effects of authoritarianism, fundamentalism actually emerged as a *negative* predictor of racial prejudice. They concluded that there are two separate elements to fundamentalist belief, one (authoritarianism/submission/aggression) focused on the *way* religious beliefs are held, which positively predicts racist attitudes and another (orthodoxy/conventionality) focused on the *content* of religious beliefs, which negatively predicts racist attitudes. It is important to note that authoritarian attitudes can be found not only in "fundamentalist" religions (though primarily so), but to some degree in all denominations. While certain religious styles and denominations appear to foster prejudice more than others, any religion can be used in a way that discriminates against those who are different.

APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Moving beyond an exploration of the positive and negative effects of religion and spirituality, it is important to think about ways in which the spiritual and religious side of existence can be integrated more fully into human growth and development. How can religion and spirituality be more consistently utilized in constructive, life-enhancing ways? How can the negative repercussions of religion and spirituality be minimized or even transformed? Can partnerships and collaboration between secular and religious/ spiritual groups lead to further enrichment of human life, relationships, and health? These are some of the vital questions the final section of this paper will address.

To understand and integrate these concepts, it is necessary to go beyond religious generalizations to a closer analysis of religious life. For example, it can be helpful to assess ways in which specific strategies and interventions can be applied in people's daily lives and to investigate ongoing programs that address these issues.

One important strategy in utilizing psychological interventions and programs to enhance human growth and development is to foster the constructive aspects of religiousness and spirituality. This approach builds on the inherent strengths and benefits which accrue to those who draw on their religious and spiritual resources, both individually and in community. Helping people to cope in positive ways that lead to positive outcomes is essential. Many religious and spiritual communities and practices emphasize such resources, including forgiveness, collaboration, support, reappraisal, and connection (Pargament, 1997). In addition, interventions can draw on religious and spiritual resources among individuals and communities to enhance physical health. Such programs have targeted numerous health outcomes, such as smoking cessation (Samuel-Hodget et al., 2009), cardiovascular health (Yanek, Becker, Mopy, Gittesohn, & Koffman, 2001), weight loss (Kennedy et al., 2005), fruit and vegetable consumption (Resnicow et al., 2004), and reducing fat intake (Bowen et

al., 2009). Several promising programs have focused specifically on African American churches (see Allicock, Resnicow, Hooten, & Campbell, in press).

Reducing the destructive aspects of religion and spirituality is another strategy for enhancing quality of life and well-being. For example, given the many repercussions of spiritual struggles, strategies which reduce such struggles can be a beneficial step toward reducing distress. In one such intervention, Gear et al. (2008) developed and evaluated a nine week spiritually integrated group treatment for college students experiencing spiritual struggles. The program was not only successful at reducing spiritual struggles, but also decreased psychological distress and increased emotion regulation skills, coping ability, and alignment between personal behaviors and stated spiritual values. Similar interventions have shown success in reducing negative religious coping and negative images of God (Oman et al., 2007) and reducing depression and spiritual struggles among HIV patients. (Tarakeshwar, Pearce, & Sikkema, 2005). The effectiveness of these programs suggests that spiritual struggles, though perhaps inevitable for many people, do not inevitably lead to problems; rather, they can be addressed through interventions which facilitate a process of positive growth and transformation.

Rather than focus on treating problems that grow out of religion and spirituality, it is possible and reasonable to prevent such problems before they occur. One example of such a proactive approach is the spiritual fitness component of the Army's recent initiative, the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program (Cornum, Matthews, & Seligman, 2011). The spiritual fitness module of the program (Pargament & Sweeney, 2011) is intended to help soldiers anticipate and deal with spiritual struggles before they occur. Based on the awareness that spirituality can serve significant motivating and developmental purposes, the program is intended to facilitate the human search for truth, self-understanding, meaning, and purpose rather than waiting for problems to arise. Although the program has yet to be evaluated, its premise of preventative intervention appears promising, especially given the positive effects of similar (treatment-based) approaches cited above.

A third consideration for taking advantage of the life-enhancing aspects of religion and spirituality is through the use of creative partnerships and collaborative relationships between religious individuals and communities. Because most Americans report that religion and/or spirituality are important to them, implementing programs through this channel can have far-reaching effects. Religious and spiritual communities are widely available, and offer numerous resources and influence. Indeed, some research supports the idea that interventions implemented through religious communities are more effective and reliable than those implemented through secular channels (Wuthnow, Hackett, & Hsu, 2004), especially as assessed by recipients of services (Ferguson, Wu, Spruijt-Metz, & Dyrness, 2007).

Religiously and spiritually oriented community interventions may or may not incorporate religious language, content, and practices. They may start inside of religious/spiritual contexts or outside of them. Such interventions often use

community psychology and action research methods - such as prevention, empowerment, self and program evaluation, and needs assessment - to enhance individual and community growth and development. They target wide-ranging social and personal problems, including poverty, racism, crime, incarceration, hunger, housing and homelessness, environmentalism, immigration, and a range of physical and mental health conditions (see Maton, in press).

Finally, one further approach is to consider the potential for the negative aspects of religion to also have positive effects. For example, as previously hinted, spiritual struggles, despite their many negative repercussions, also have the potential for contributing to positive change and growth. Important historical religious exemplars (e.g. Jesus, Buddha) faced significant struggle on their paths toward spiritual maturity; such struggles may in fact have been essential. More recent examples include Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., who both faced significant spiritual dilemmas in their non-violent oppositions to gross injustice. They used experiences of humiliation which might have become catalysts for violence, as discussed previously in this paper, to instead fuel a process of deep transformation (Jones, 2006).

Research supports this notion that religious and spiritual struggle can lead not only to negative effects, but also to positive outcomes such as post-traumatic growth. For example, in their development of the Brief Religious Coping Scale, Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez (1998) found that despite links between negative religious coping and poorer physical and mental health, negative coping was also associated with stress-related growth across three separate samples. Other studies have supported these finding across diverse religious groups. For example, Proffitt, Cann, Calhoun, and Tedeschi (2007) found that Jewish and Christian clergy members experienced post-traumatic growth in response to both positive and negative religious coping. In addition, Abu-Raiya, Pargament, and Mahoney (2011) found that increased levels of desecration and sacred loss were associated with greater post-traumatic growth among U.S. Muslims after 9/11.These findings suggest that negative religious coping, despite harmful effects in some circumstances and for some people, can be a possible source of growth among diverse populations. Further research in this area can lead to a better understanding of the ways in which some of the negative aspects of religion can be not just minimized, but addressed in ways that lead to positive, long-lasting transformation.

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