Chapter 9
Religion, Spirituality, and Development in Adulthood

Most religious traditions contain a rich body of wisdom about how to move beyond childhood faith to a mature religious and spiritual life (Casey, 1996, p. 59; see Section 7.2). In contrast, psychological research has tended to focus more on childhood or adolescence, and the psychological studies of adult development that do exist mostly neglect spiritual and religious issues. However, an interesting body of work does exist that casts light on a number of features of spiritual development during adulthood.

9.1 Issues in Adult Development Research

Psychological studies on adult development are difficult to conduct as most possible research methodologies have drawbacks. The most common approach is the **cross-sectional study**, which compares groups of different ages on selected variables and then concludes that differences between groups are due to development. However, these studies have the problem that the comparison groups of different ages or **cohorts** are born at different times and thus grew up under diverse circumstances. This means that the different age groups may not be comparable with each other, a difficulty known as the **cohort effect**. This problem is especially important in religion research as different cohort groups such as US baby boomers appear to have aspects to their spirituality that are unique (Schaie & Hofer, 2001; Rudinger & Rietz, 2001; Roof, 1993). An alternative approach is the **longitudinal study**, which follows one group of people over a period of years to look for changes. However these studies are difficult to conduct and take years to produce meaningful data, so studies that combine cross-sectional and longitudinal features are often best. Developmental research on religion and spirituality in adulthood has been criticized as suffering from other problems as well, such as the following:

- Lack of a theoretical framework
- A focus on the functional aspects of religion while ignoring other important aspects such as religious experience and consciousness
- Neglect of important variables such as gender or spirituality
- Superficial assessment of constructs, e.g., equating religious participation with frequency of attendance

J.M. Nelson, *Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality,*
DOI 10.1007/978-0-387-87573-6_9, @ Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2009

- Neglect of qualitative approaches to research that if done well may be better suited to the study of spiritual and religious development (Blieszner & Ramsey, 2002).

Research on religious and spiritual development in adulthood has also confronted three major theoretical questions in addition to these methodological problems. First, are adult spirituality and religiousness similar to those of childhood? Research suggests that there are substantial differences, which means that we must be cautious in applying childhood developmental models to the adult situation. For instance, while our understanding of child religiousness is probably enhanced by considering it in relation to the level of cognitive development, assuming that the same is true of adult religiousness introduces the potential for unexamined bias based on the values and preconceptions of the experimenter (Seifert, 2002). Furthermore, people's conceptions of these things and their religious motivations may change during adulthood. For example, some studies suggest that quest motivation is more typical of earlier stages of adulthood while intrinsic religious motivation increases later in age (Watson, Howard, Hood, & Morris, 1988).

The second major theoretical issue confronting researchers is the question, what is the goal of development? Contemporary psychologists often describe it as "successful aging" which includes (1) a low probability of disease and related disability, with a life style that minimizes risk factors for problems, (2) a high physical and cognitive functional capacity, and (3) an active engagement with life, including good interpersonal relationships, productive activity that is socially valued, and resilience or rapid recovery from stress and other life changes (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). This defines the goal of human life in terms of health, productivity, and social adaptation. Other psychological definitions go beyond health and adaptation to consider human potential. For instance, Paul Baltes (e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) defines development as increasing *wisdom*, which involves our ability to coordinate personal resources such as tolerance or creativity so that we can pursue well-being and the meaningful good life for self and others.

Traditional definitions of psychological maturity are largely silent on the issue of religion or spirituality, but recent work in psychology has tried to rectify this problem. For instance, Koenig and his colleagues (e.g., Crowther et al., 2002) talk about the concept of **spiritual maturity**, which involves the development of a relationship with the transcendent or sacred that reflects positively on the welfare of others and ourselves. These conceptions of spiritual maturity generally have two characteristics: (1) They include at least weak forms of transcendence as a necessary part of life (e.g., Young-Eisendrath & Miller, 2000), and (2) they are holistic, arguing that spiritual maturity encompasses a wise variety of factors including relational, emotional, ethical, and cognitive strengths (e.g., Ray & McFadden, 2001). This raises the issue of whether spiritual development may be thought of as a separate life task or whether it is simply integral to many aspects of development (Gold & Mansager, 2000). Empirical evidence certainly supports the inclusion of practice, relational, and religious experiences (e.g., a sense of God's presence) as independent important factors, in addition to cognitive ones in the developmental process (Bassett et al., 1991; Kass & Lennox, 2004).

Relationality is especially prominent in new conceptions of spiritual maturity, such as the one developed in the collaborative work of theologian Ron Shults and psychologist Steven Sandage (Shults & Sandage, 2006; Sandage & Shults, 2007). In their view, spirituality is ultimately relational in nature and involves developing connections to God, others, and ourselves. These relationships develop within a social context and are dependent upon relational schemas developed in life. They are essential for personal knowing and the formation of the self and can promote (or inhibit) transformation. In this view, the goal of development or maturity is not just about happiness or well-being, it must involve a search for wholeness as well as the development of a fruitful, secure love and intimacy with God and others. This mature spirituality requires a balance between **seeking**, which involves openness to change and reflective wisdom, and **dwelling**, which is more about attachment (see Section 1.3.2). Transformation toward maturity is fostered by (1) relationships and communities that support both seeking and dwelling, and (2) stress or difficulties that can form a crucible within which transformation can take place.

A third major theoretical issue revolves around the question, are stage theories an effective approach to describing adult development? While stage theories of development have dominated both the child and the adult literature, a number of scholars (e.g., Worthington, 1989; Studzinski, 1985; Vergote, 1994; Overton, 1998) argue that as one enters adulthood the developmental process becomes increasingly variable due to both biology and experience (McFadden, 1999). Rigid stage models function poorly in this kind of situation; more flexible approaches that attend to the interplay between cognitive, affective, and relational factors may provide a better understanding of the developmental process. In this situation, **pilgrimage** models may be especially attractive ways to think about development (see Section 7.1.1).

For instance, Streib (2001a, 2001b) has proposed modifying Fowler's theory using postmodern insights. He suggests replacing the current hierarchical stages with a list of religious styles or modes that are alternative ways of being religious. The modes include ritual, symbolic, cognitive, and narrative components that are rooted in life history and are more relational in nature than cognitive. The styles include the following:

- *Subjective and intuitive*: prominent in early childhood
- *Instrumental-reciprocal*: based on give and take; God seen as a parental authority
- *Mutual*: based on needs for respect, love, and identification; God seen as partner
- *Individuative-Systemic*: based on view of world as a system with us as a part
- *Dialogical*: based on the ability to let go and learn from others

Many authors argue that adult spiritual development may not involve a movement to new and distinct stages but rather a spiral process where issues from early life reappear and are dealt with at increasingly deeper levels (cf. von Balthasar, 1995, p. 174). For instance, issues of intimacy will be important in early adulthood in the context of marriage and childrearing, but in later adulthood will be confronted again as relationships mature or are lost. In this view,

spiritual development involves the steady deepening of religious meaning and practice in ways that are not reducible to brain states. Stages of development are more like challenges to be confronted, the nature and timing of which may be dictated by culture in addition to biology and will be profoundly affected by context (Roehlkepartain, 2004; Studzinski, 1985, p. 97; cf. Wink & Dillon, 2002; Damasio, 2003, pp. 284–286; Singer, 1996). Shults and Sandage talk about the process of spiritual development or transformation in terms of *intensification* and increasing complexity of relationships, rather than a series of new tasks or preoccupations (2006, pp. 18, 29).

9.2 Young Adult and Midlife Development

9.2.1 Life Span Patterns

Recent research by social psychologists and sociologists of religion has significantly expanded our understanding of changes in religion and spirituality across the life span. These studies have begun to use sophisticated methodologies, including qualitative interviews with older adults, and looked at multiple dimensions such as religious affiliation, organizational participation, religious practices, and commitment. They have also tried to understand religious change in the context of other aspects of life and the surrounding culture. Currently, the most extensive analyses of longitudinal data on adult religious and spiritual development come from the work of Michelle Dillon and Paul Wink, who have been studying subjects from the Berkeley Institute of Human Development (IHD) longitudinal study, a long-term follow-up of a group of individuals born in Northern California during the 1920s (Dillon & Wink, 2007; Wink & Dillon, 2002, 2003; Dillon, Wink, & Fay, 2003; Wink, 2003). Although the sample is not representative in some ways (e.g., lower levels of parental religiousness) and includes some single-item measures of religiousness, spirituality, and well-being, it provides a rich picture of change in this group of adults (Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, & Morgan, 2002).

Is religiousness stable across the life span? Dillon and Wink have found that the answer to this question depends on how you look at the data. When you compare group averages for different ages, studies indicate that religiousness shows small decreases during adolescence and young adulthood to a midlife low point and then increases later in life, with perhaps a few up and down fluctuations over the course of the life span. However, an examination of individual patterns tells a somewhat different story. In the IHD study, Dillon and Wink found that individually people displayed very stable high or low patterns of religiosity. Significant upward or downward movement occurred in only in about 6% of cases, and these changes typically happened in adolescence or early adulthood. At the group level, the early and midlife dip occurred later in women and did not occur among conservative Protestants. External events connected to decreases usually involved

work demands, recreational opportunities, and children leaving home, although life transitions or historical events were sometimes involved in larger changes. Less frequently, negative experiences were involved in decreased religious involvement, generally a disillusionment with church members in reaction to excessive strictness, but occasionally other factors like disagreements with church policies about moral issues. Dillon and Wink argue that involvement with religion in adolescence provides a social engagement foundation that leads to higher religiousness, as well as a number of positive mental health benefits.

While most people in the IHD group displayed little change in religiosity over the life span, more marked changes occurred in spirituality. Beginning around midlife and especially after age 60 or so, Dillon and Wink found steady and substantial increases in spirituality, particularly for women, although other studies have found that roughly 80–90% of older adults report similar levels of importance in religiousness and spirituality (Musick, Traphagan, Koenig, & Larson, 2000). These changes have also been found in non-Western settings (Takahashi & Ide, 2003). The small changes in religion compared to the much larger changes in spirituality suggest that religion is fairly consistent throughout the life span while spirituality is more of a later life phenomenon. However, they also found that while religiousness levels typically do not change, there are changes in the *meaning* of religion, with shifts toward a more universal morality, a decrease in religion as a social focus, and an increase in the importance of faith and theological issues (Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, & Morgan, 2002; Wink & Dillon, 2002).

The studies by Wink and Dillon also indicate that spirituality functions differently in religious and nonreligious individuals. Increases in spirituality in nonreligious individuals appear to be related to (1) personality characteristics like introspection, openness to experience (cf. McCrae, 1999), intellectual independence, unconventionality or creativity, and (2) the occurrence of personal turmoil and negative life events such as conflict with spouse or parents and financial strain. In these cases, spirituality is marked by a strong self-focus and search for personal growth. In contrast, the combination of strong spirituality and religiosity appears to be a stable, lifelong pattern unrelated to personal problems. These individuals are more social and report more close warm relationships and community involvement. They score higher on personality characteristics like conscientiousness and agreeableness. In a similar manner, religiousness and nonreligious spirituality are both related to generativity and purposive involvement, but in different ways. Nonreligious spirituality is more connected with a self-expanding generativity that is focused on desires for immortality, power, and leaving a creative legacy. Generativity connected with religious spirituality is more about communal concerns, developing strong relationships, caring and giving to others, and displaying personal altruism. Wink and Dillon interpreted their data as supporting Robert Wuthnow's division of people into (1) religious **dwellers** who are generally religious and spiritual, and (2) spiritual **seekers** who score high on spirituality but low on religiousness. They argue that psychology is biased against dwellers in favor of seekers but that these are equally valid and in some cases overlapping styles (Wink, 2003).

9.2.2 Emerging Adulthood and Religious Switching

Traditionally, adulthood was thought to begin somewhat abruptly in the late teenage years at the end of adolescence. However, cultural changes in postindustrial societies have caused some scholars to identify **emerging adulthood** as a new and sometimes difficult transitional time running from the end of adolescence through the mid-to-late 20s. Characteristics of this period include prolonged independence from family responsibilities, role, and relationship exploration or instability, and reevaluation of important aspects of one's worldview and religious practices. Identity formation is now thought to extend beyond adolescence into emerging adulthood, and this prolonged instability in the context of a complex postindustrial and global culture may lead some to construct multiple or bicultural identities (Arnett, 2000a, 2002).

The current US cohort in this age range is a diverse, post-Baby Boomer group with some characteristics that stand out as important for religious and spiritual development. Contemporary US emerging adults have grown up in a time of great social change, and while optimistic about their personal prospects for success, they tend to be pessimistic about the outlook for their generation and have struggled with increasing levels of psychological and emotional problems. Surveys suggest that over 80% of this group continue to find issues of spirituality, religion, and life philosophy or meaning very important. However, many cultural influences such as the media now tend to separate spirituality from religion, and members of this cohort tend to be skeptical of religious institutions because of dull or negative previous experiences and a fear that religion will inhibit individual freedom. University environments are also typically unsupportive of religious or spiritual development and reflection (Eckstrom, 2004). So while parental influence is still the predominant influence on the formation of religiosity among emerging adults, it is becoming more likely that individuals in this group will choose to decouple spiritual seeking from parental religious practices, leading to the formation of individualized combinations of religious and nonreligious spiritual beliefs. Personal relationships such as marriage and family also have ongoing importance for this group, both as a general foundation for future happiness and as an important factor in religious life (Bishop, Lacour, Nutt, Vivian, & Lee, 2004; Day, 1994; Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Arnett, 2000b; Burke, 1999).

The separation of spiritual beliefs from religious practice among some people in this group may have important implications. In a study involving in-depth interviews with British and Indian spiritually mature individuals, Thomas (1997) found that early mystical and religious experiences can have important effects on development throughout life, but that in order for this to happen there must be participation in subsequent spiritual disciplines, and that this is much easier if one is in a community that understands the experiences and has disciplines available to help the person incorporate them into their life. Maintenance of these practices outside of a framework of tradition and community is possible but much more difficult.

One specific kind of religious change that can happen during emerging adulthood or later in life is **religious switching**, the change from participation in one religious group or tradition to another. It is common, found perhaps in a third of

US adults (Roof, 1989). The odds of switching appears to be increased by a number of things, including desire for increased social status (Stark & Glock, 1968), changes in family, friendship or marital relationships, geographic moves, theological dissatisfactions, or lapses in religious practice. Strong parental religious commitment and similarity between mother and father, as well as their intention to transmit religious faith appear to be the primary factors connected with resistance to switching. Other factors that support remaining in one's religious tradition of origin are having children, and residence in parts of the US more supportive of religion such as rural areas. Childhood membership in a church decreases the odds of switching, and the factors involved in switching appear to be different for different groups. For instance, higher levels of education are positively related to switching among fundamentalists but negatively related to change in evangelicals. This may be because, while education does not affect participation, it does have a negative effect on Bible beliefs—a staple of fundamentalist religious communities (Loveland, 2003; Sherkat, 1998; Smith & Sikkink, 2003).

A number of sociological models have been devised to explain religious switching. Some explanations focus on switching as a way of enhancing social status. Other models fall into three groups (Sherkat, 2001; Finke, 1997):

1. **Supply side theories** argue that it is the structure of religious supply—churches in Christian contexts—that determines switching. For instance, some supply side theories explain the switching of people to conservative churches and away from mainline ones as a function of the higher commitment demanded by conservative groups, which enhances retention and makes them more distinctive in comparison to secular organizations. This type of reasoning lies at the basis of some cognitive-economic models of religious stability and change, such as rational choice theory (see below, Section 9.3.2).
2. **Demand side theories** attempt to explain switching by looking at factors that affect demand such as personal preferences and social sanctions that might limit or encourage choices. Secularization theory (see Section 1.3.1) is a type of demand side theory, because it argues that cultural and socioeconomic changes in Western society are reducing demand for religious activities.
3. **Human capital theories** point out that involvement in a particular religious group allows one to gain religious value through learning the teachings and practices of the group. This value would be lost if the person changed to a very different group, so there is a motivation for people to stay or change to a similar group. This theory is probably better at explaining retention than switching.

A number of family factors are connected to religious stability. Parental closeness is predictive of retention or return to childhood religion, while parental divorce is related to switching or abandonment. Family cohesion is related to retention, while family conflict or differences in belief with one's parents are associated with doubt. Return is connected to major relational events like marriage or having children, although religious differences in the marriage can lead to decreased participation. Interestingly, one study has found that women who change patterns of attendance have higher levels of anxiety disorders, while changing in men is associated with

lower rates of depression. A possible explanation for the findings is that women are more likely to reduce religious activities in response to emotional problems, while men tend to continue participation (Maselko & Buka, 2008).

The level and type of religious participation in individuals is also related to stability and change. Retention is most common among those raised in evangelical Protestant and Catholic churches, special groups like Latter-Day Saints, and those with traditional beliefs. It is least common among those raised in liberal Protestant churches. Those leaving evangelical churches tend to switch rather than abandon religion altogether. Not surprisingly, those who were at one point committed and participating members are more likely to retain membership or return after an absence (Wilson & Sherkat, 1994; Roof & Gesch, 1995; Hertel, 1995).

9.2.3 Midlife and Turning Points

Since the time of Carl Jung, psychologists have seen midlife as a time of transition and change with important implications for religious and spiritual development. This happens in several ways. Midlife is a time in which polarities, inconsistencies, and even paradoxes in our life are confronted. We have needs for attachment but also for separateness, so how are we to resolve these apparently opposite forces in our life (Levinson, 1978, pp. 209.)? How shall we deal with the personal and career limitations that become more obvious as we grow older? These are issues confronted with particular intensity at midlife. Also, midlife is thought to be a time of increasing **generativity**, the movement described by Erikson (1950) involving a deepening responsibility for others and a desire to contribute something of worth to the world (see Section 5.3.2).

An important type of change that is extremely common during young adulthood and midlife is a **turning point**, something that redirects our life on a long lasting basis. This could include changes or recommitments in roles or important goals as family members die, or we experience failures in relationships and career. It can also involve changes in our identity as relationships and commitments change, and our aging brings about physical limitations and an awareness of mortality (Kristeva, 1987; Kunnen & Wassink, 2003). Midlife turning points can be sudden affairs provoked by a crisis or struggle, but more commonly they involve a slow steady acceptance of changes that lead toward increasing responsibility and maturity. In either case they involve experiences of emptiness—limit experiences—that challenge our previous frameworks and are not solvable on our own. These experiences can be denied, buried under distractions, or confronted (Wethington, Cooper, & Holmes, 1997; Fuller, 1988; Gunn, 2000, pp. 1–16). Turning points are often only recognized in retrospect and can be experienced initially as a feeling of estrangement or as a sense of **accedie**—discontent, apathy or boredom—rather than severe emotional turmoil, depression, or anxiety (see Section 11.2.1). Signs that a turning point has passed include a change in direction, identity or role commitment, and resistance to a return to old patterns (Brewi & Brennan, 1988; Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997).

The issues faced by people at midlife can be seen as having spiritual components that are addressed in the teachings and practice of most religious traditions (Studzinski, 1985; Wethington, Cooper, & Holmes, 1997). For instance, religion can help us achieve better integration in the face of life's conflicting demands and paradoxes. Spirituality involves the movement toward a holistic inner balance and a strong sense of connectedness, so changes toward recognizing and learning to live with paradoxes and limitations represent movements toward spiritual maturity. Jung thought that most of the second half of life dealt with these kinds of inner spiritual issues, for instance in the acceptance of our shadow side (Jung, 2001; Brewi & Brennan, 1988, pp. 55–1; see Section 5.2.1). Religion can help in this process by providing a system of beliefs and practices that move a person toward self-knowledge and self-acceptance—an honest recognition of their limitations and a willingness to accept them.

Religion and generativity are intimately connected. Highly generative individuals often report that it is religious beliefs, practices, and examples that motivate their generative efforts. This generativity can lead to profound social and religious innovation as in the case of **homines religiosi** like Gandhi, who became driven to actualize for other people the religious faith and values they have accepted for themselves and found helpful (Erikson, 1969, pp. 397–402; cf. McAdams, 2006).

Finally, religion and spirituality can be deeply involved in midlife turning points. Many turning points have a spiritual and holistic quality that involves trying to find a sense of balance and connectedness to the larger world. They can be triggered by a limit experience that leads to a crisis involving a loss of control and meaning. These can have a broadening effect, which if managed and resolved from a religious or spiritual framework can make the situation a *spiritual* turning point, leading to religious or spiritual change (James & Samuels, 1999; Fiori, Hays, & Meador, 2004; Elder, 1995; Wethington, Cooper, & Holmes, 1997; Musgrave, 1997). Religion can help us negotiate these turning points and seek necessary changes in our life. Instead of losing hope and giving up, or trying to avoid dealing with the problems and losses that occur at midlife, the support of a religious faith and community may help us to mourn our losses, seek transformation and move on, as we prepare for the second half of our life journey. This transformation could include a shift in time perspective, taking the "long view" on our life, or becoming more involved in the present moment. Changes could involve a new balancing of priorities, a reevaluation of relationships or other life structures like job and place of residence. It could also lead to a reinterpretation of some life events and a change in our images of self and God. These kinds of transformations can change the scripts or structures we use to organize experience and make meaning from events, and thus have the potential to fundamentally alter our identity and experience of life (Kunnen & Wassink, 2003; Tomkins & Demos, 1995).

What must happen for turning points to produce spiritual change? Balk (1999) argues that there are three factors: (1) a crisis or change creating psychological imbalances that are hard to correct, (2) time for reflection, and (3) a continuing and permanent "coloring" of our life by the experience. The kind of reflection we make on events is affected by a number of factors; for instance, if God is seen as

reliable, able to help, and open to communication, reflection tends to be positive and optimistic (Hays, Meador, Branch, & George, 2001). Because turning points involve problems that we are unable to solve on our own, another factor in spiritual and religious change is our willingness to admit our need for help and to accept it, surrendering our will to a higher power that will help us find wholeness. In this view, happiness in later life depends on moving away from egoism and toward personal integration with these sources of support (Fuller, 1988, pp. 103–112; see also Section 11.3.1).

9.2.4 Belief and Unbelief

Up to now we have mostly spoken about the increase or change in religious and spiritual life during adulthood. Another possibility is that the individual may reject religion and perhaps spirituality altogether, adopting a stance of unbelief. In the US, these individuals typically identify themselves on surveys as having no religious preference. Primarily drawn from people who have been loosely or never attached to religion, their numbers have leveled off recently at about 14% of the US population, with a smaller percentage of these identifying themselves as active atheists (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, pp. 15–18; Sherkat, 2001). With the exception of some areas in Europe, most parts of the world have similar or lower rates of religious unbelief.

Taylor (2007) argues that unbelief is generally not based on rational arguments against religion. Unbelief is not required by science or philosophy, and the religious views attacked by unbelievers are typically those of childhood Sunday school rather than real mature adult faith (see Sections 2.5 and 6.2). Instead, it is the moral "spin" of unbelief narratives that makes them attractive to its adherents. Unbelievers see themselves as courageous, mature adults by opposing religion, which they view as antirational, authoritarian (and thus restrictive of freedom), and distracting from the pursuit of happiness and human benefit. For unbelievers, the throwing off of religion provides a feeling of power and invulnerability. Religion is thus not something to be ignored but something bad to be opposed and stamped out. Power and the impersonal disengaged reason of the individual are seen as the best way to increase human dignity, an ethical stance typically rejected by religious individuals and groups as overly reductionistic, utopian, and mistaken. The viewpoint of unbelief forms a restricted "closed world structure" (2007, p. 551) that makes it seem unarguable to its followers, even though the positivist views of history and religion on which it is based are highly questionable. The need to maintain this structure in the face of belief means that unbelief, like belief, is not a completely stable position and must be continually supported. Taylor's argument parallels neurobiological findings that suggest that both belief and unbelief are strongly hedonic in nature (Harris, Sheth, & Cohen, 2007).

Unbelief can be looked at in a couple of ways. In the more traditional view, unbelief is an end-state condition in which people reject the truth value of religious

teachings and may even deny the value of any type of spiritual quest or awareness. This condition might be reached through **cultural unbelief**, where a person grows up without any religious background. It also can occur because of **apostasy**, when a person is raised with belief but later actively rejects it. Apostasy may result in the adoption of **nihilistic** views with its attendant **existential sickness** and need to disconfirm the beliefs of others (see Section 11.1.2). Strongly held positions of unbelief tend to be associated with the latter and are defined in opposition to belief and negative conceptions of religion (Taylor, 2007, pp. 269–274). An alternate viewpoint sees unbelief or religious doubt as a fundamental component of the spiritual and religious life of all people, not just those who reject religion. For instance, those influenced by the apophatic traditions in Christianity may reject beliefs about God because they fall short of the divine reality (Turner, 2002; see Section 3.3.2). The idea that unbelief is an important feature of religion is elaborated by the European researcher Antoine Vergote, who has articulated a well-developed theory of unbelief.

9.2.4.1 Vergote on Belief and Unbelief

For Vergote, religion is "a system of belief" and "an ensemble of conceptions, forms of behavior and experiences related to (a) 'supernatural' being(s) which is (are) not the object of a knowing comparable to other forms of knowledge" (1997 pp. 208–209). This belief is not just an ideology but involves relationships and everything that makes up the life of an individual (1997, pp. 26–40). Vergote (1998, p. 44) argues that since religion deals with the most fundamental desires in human life, it automatically stirs up conflict so that along with the desire to seek God there is also a pressure to doubt and distance ourselves from the Divine. Belief and unbelief thus exist in reference to each other in a tension that changes over time. In a sense, parts of us accept belief, while other parts ignore it or struggle against it (Kristeva, 1987, p. 39). Belief is thus somewhat unstable—it at least in part involves faith (Bishop, 2007)—and must be constantly maintained through active involvement, just like a relationship. Believers must repeatedly decline human inclinations to follow a different way of life. Likewise unbelief is a system of belief that requires maintenance. For those in an environment that has eliminated religious symbols or who have distanced themselves from religion for a long period of time, this is easy, and unbelief can become a matter of indifference (Vergote, 1997, pp. 207–214). However, substantive exposure to religion and the evidence supporting it challenges unbelief and can produce a crisis similar to a crisis in belief, although more personal. The irritation, scorn, and even hatred of nonbelievers for religion is quite different from the feelings the believer encounters in a crisis:

> "These feelings cannot be compared to any other experience. People with a deep-rooted hate of Marxism or capitalism feel that they are attacked or threatened by a hostile force; but given the fact that the enemy is seen to be external, this does not touch upon their sense of human value. When it comes to a hatred of religion, however, there is a certain

> contempt, even a disgust, as though the enemy were within. We cannot understand this phenomenon unless we realize that the very fact of religion raises a question with regard to the individual's very person, and that this question is, by nature, felt as an intrusive and threatening summons. The psyche defends itself by throwing out the call as an illness" (Vergote, 1997, p. 213).

This negative reaction is often justified by reference to events from the past, either personal experiences or historical events like the Inquisition or the condemnation of Galileo. From a rational perspective, the reasoning can seem odd: One would not refuse to take advantage of modern medicine because physicians used to practice bloodletting or give medicines later found to be harmful! However, Vergote argues that this loathing of unbelievers for religion occurs because religious belief represents a danger, contradicting basic certainties in the life of the unbeliever, including the primacy of one's own reason to set goals and the ways we will attain them. A fundamental aspect of atheism is thus a defense against a threatening God (Vergote, 1969, pp. 259–266).

Vergote thought that both cognitive and emotional factors separated believers and unbelievers from each other. In terms of cognition, Vergote argued that believers and unbelievers stress different conceptions of God. In his empirical research, Vergote found that believers and unbelievers used similar categories to talk about God, but that Christian subjects emphasized maternal characteristics of God, while unbelievers emphasized the paternal ones. These different conceptions of God were related to motives for belief or unbelief. Unbelievers focus on rejection of authority, because acceptance of a superior force implies a loss of control and highlights human deficiencies. Christian subjects, on the other hand, focused on trust and an acceptance of their existential dependence on a dependable reality. Vergote thus sees the essential issue in the decision about belief or unbelief to be the conflict between autonomy and dependence. While believers see God as a help and an ally, unbelievers see God as a competitor and a threat to their absolute autonomy. Unbelief then is often accompanied by a sense of triumph over a rival, a sense of freedom, and relief that religion does not offer truth so that we may seek it by human striving and move away from the past. Vergote saw this cognitive tendency as rooted in the psychological disposition and history of the individual, leading them to favor certain types of God images (1997, pp. 226–245, 272–273; 1998, p. 96).

Vergote argues that emotional issues like resentment and disappointment are also primary factors in the development of unbelief. These are problems that are particularly acute in the case of unbelievers, who see evil in the world as incompatible with the existence of a good God and who have unrealistic, utopian ideas about what organized religion should be like. These resentments destroy the emotional base necessary for belief by reducing the capacity for trust and attachment and fueling questions about the goodness of persons and of God. This promotes a focus on external blaming that makes it difficult to see how we sometimes suffer from the same impure motives and actions we criticize in others. Vergote argues that forgiveness is the best antidote to these feelings of resentment so that forgiveness is not just a consequence of faith but a precondition for it and a liberation from the emotional memories that resentment and vengeance are unable to erase. Vergote

thus has a relational view of feeling as embedded in our relationship with God and others. He argues that good religious development involves an enhancement of the emotional qualities and a leaving behind of childlike, magical views of religion for a realistic and mature faith (1969, p. 285; 1997, pp. 251–266).

9.2.4.2 Other Empirical Perspectives

Sociologists of religion have recently begun to comment more extensively on unbelief. Wuthnow (1999) has found that while some individuals who leave their faith of origin because of bad experiences or boredom will reject religion and even spirituality entirely, it is more common for unbelievers to still talk about spirituality. They do not reject the sacred; they just disagree with or question the beliefs of others and want a set of views that are more acceptable. Thus, those leaving religion seldom escape their past entirely; they continue to see religious meaning in events. These people may become questers or spiritual seekers, have some continuing sense of the sacred, and may continue to engage in religious practices, reflect on religious issues or even maintain a peripheral level of participation in a religious organization. However, Wuthnow notes that people seldom continue to perform religious practices on their own, so maintenance of a vibrant spirituality apart from religion is difficult.

Psychological research specifically targeting unbelievers is rather limited, with the notable exception of some work by Canadian researchers Altemeyer and Hunsberger. In one study (1997, pp. 209–214), they looked at university students who chose belief or unbelief at odds with their familial background. In particular, they looked at *Amazing Apostates* (AAs), who came from religious families and *Amazing Believers* (ABs), who came from nonreligious backgrounds. They found significant differences between the two groups. AAs gave intellectual reasons for becoming apostates and talked about it as an individual decision relatively detached from peer influence. ABs reported that they made the change to help deal with emotional problems and issues; familial divorce was much more common in AB families, suggesting that conversion could be part of a compensation process (see Section 8.2.2). The change process was also different for the two groups, as AAs reported that their transition began earlier, lasted longer and caused more familial disruption than was the case for ABs. ABs were higher on measures of right-wing authoritarianism than AAs. These findings would seem to be in accordance with Vergote's theory, which predicts that unbelievers would attribute more salience to authority issues and be more anti-authoritarian, while believers would view the issue as less salient or perhaps be positively attracted to the structure provided by religious communities and beliefs.

A more recent study by Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) looks at North American atheists in general, rather than just those who come from religious backgrounds. The pattern from the data suggests that these individuals typically have little religious socialization in childhood and have serious doubts about religious beliefs beginning in adolescence, although many had at least a period in which they considered religion or had some attachment to it. The primary reason for unbelief

was a dismissal of religion for lack of acceptable rational proof, a contrast to the European situation where perceived lack of flexibility and irrelevance of belief are more common reasons (Ganzevoort, 1994). The majority of US atheists reported that their stance produced difficulty with family and/or friends. Despite this, they were strongly committed to their unbelief. The majority of them were likely to proselytize their beliefs (just over 60%), although they had lower levels of interest in passing beliefs on to their children. They reported high levels of dogmatism about atheistic beliefs—they said that nothing could change their mind on the topic—and also had high levels of prejudice toward those with strong religious views like fundamentalists.

Atheism in Europe comes about in a different social and religious context, so it is difficult to make comparisons or apply information about one group to the study of the other. Researchers have identified 4 kinds of atheism in the European setting: (1) *transitional*, a temporary condition when moving from one kind of religious belief or affiliation to another; (2) *philosophical*, a worked through position including humanism or scientific materialism; (3) *unchurched*, maintaining some aspects of religious belief but eschewing connection to a religious organization; or (4) *indifferent*. Common issues reported as reasons for unbelief include need for autonomy and control, fatalism, relationship with others, specific intellectual problems like evil or suffering, and negative experiences with religious education (Oser, Reich, & Bucher, 1994). This data offers broad support to Vergote's conceptualization of unbelief.

What does one believe about the world and life issues, if a person embraces a stance of religious or spiritual unbelief? If one rejects religion on rational grounds, one is likely to also reject magical models like New Age spirituality, leaving one with secular beliefs such as scientism and Marxism. However, the collapse of communism and increasingly severe problems caused by scientific technology have rendered these alternative worldviews less attractive, and most secular alternatives also lack the affective, relational, and organizational resources offered by religions (Helve, 1994; Vergote, 1994). This leaves many individuals outside religious traditions in a vacuum that may or may not seem problematic to them.

Given the problems with nonreligious alternatives, it is not surprising that many apostates return to church in later life (Wilson & Sherkat, 1994). However, many do not, and the stability of cultural unbelief or nonaffiliation is increasing in younger age groups (43% vs. 30% in older adults; Sherkat, 2001). An interesting study of older US nonattendees by Black (1995) found that continued noninvolvement was associated with three beliefs: (1) spiritual achievements are not real successes and are unimportant for living life, (2) religious involvement would distract from pursuing unrealized goals related to financial success and work, or (3) the persons saw themselves as possessing superior qualities and personal achievements, so they did not need to consider spiritual issues, which they perceived as involving naive beliefs. Those who did have a concept of the Divine thought God to be uninvolved, so while unbelievers may continue to think in religious categories they exclude God from life. The older adults in Black's study articulated a vision of the ideal person, who is a youthful hero, solitary, physically strong, and possessing great

sexual prowess. Once solidly established, unbelief can become a set perspective for life, and even profound religious experiences will not alter it, for these will be interpreted or explained away from a nonreligious framework (Ganzevoort, 1994; Bachs, 1994).

Since the Enlightenment, there has been a strong tendency for intellectuals and academics to resist religion, so unbelief has been a common position among people with advanced university educations such as psychologists (see Section 14.2.2). The well-known developmental researcher Susan McFadden, for instance, tells the story of how her department chair advised her to never use the words "religion" or "spirituality" in a paper title for fear of being denied tenure or promotion (Ray & McFadden, 2001). However, some observers think that there may be at least some small changes taking place. For instance, in a study of Brazilian academic physicists, de Paiva (1994) found a decrease in hostility toward religion compared to 20 years ago, when adherence to Marxism and atheism was a prerequisite for professional recognition. While almost all the academics in her sample were detached from institutional religion, there was now a strong tendency to treat religion as a private issue that does not necessarily interfere with science.

9.3 Mechanisms of Stability and Change

Current research on development highlights one central fact: powerful forces for both stability and change in religion or spirituality are active in the lives of adults. The persistence of patterns across adulthood suggests stability, and traditional psychological theories of adulthood have tended to focus on these static elements of behavior and experience, or on problems of physical decline (Valsiner, 2000, p. 8). On the other hand, examples of profound transformations that involve self-transcendence, growth, and a death of the former self also abound (Liebert, 2000, pp. 126–127). What are the mechanisms promoting stability or change? Some researchers have considered personality as a factor, but while there are some modest relationships between personality and spirituality or religiosity in certain situations, many important things like an orientation to spiritual transcendence are unrelated to personality variables (Piedmont, 1999). This has led researchers to consider alternate ways to explain spiritual or religious stability and change. In this section, we consider three possible frameworks—religious motivation, cognition or rational choice, and life narratives.

9.3.1 Stability and Religious Motivation: Internal, External, and Quest

Psychologists studying religion tend to argue that adults engage in religion because of internal motives, and that each individual has a particular pattern of motivation that is fairly consistent throughout the lifespan, providing a kind of stability to their religious

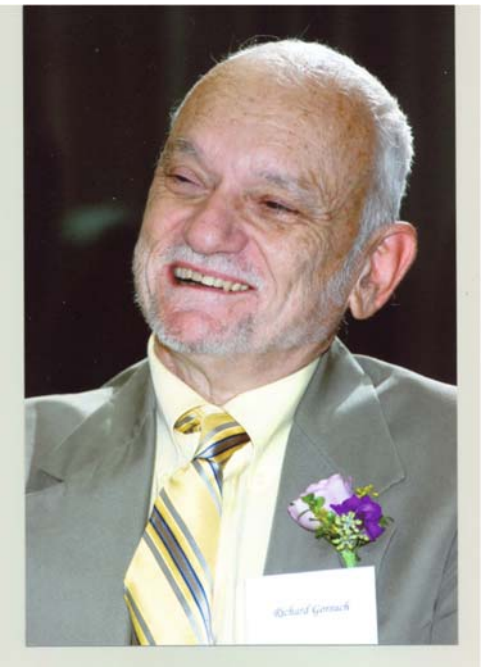

Fig. 9.1 *Richard Gorsuch.* One of the world's leading psychologists of religion, Gorsuch has made important conceptual, methodological, and empirical research contributions in a number of areas, including research on religious motivation and our internalized images of God. Photo courtesy of Richard Gorsuch

behavior. Schaefer and Gorsuch (1991) see religious motivation as one of the three important factors that determine religious behavior, along with beliefs, coping styles, and their important interactions (Hathaway & Pargament, 1990) (Fig. 9.1).

Religious motivation theory goes back to the work of Gordon Allport on intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity (see Section 1.4.6). In the original theory, Allport identified two types of religious motivation. The first is an **extrinsic motivation** (E) that sees religion as a means so that religious involvement is motivated by instrumental or utilitarian goals and self-interest. The second is an **intrinsic motivation** (I) that sees religion as an end in itself worth doing for its own sake regardless of other benefits, a "master motive" that has ultimate significance above other things and provides a creed which an individual will try to internalize and follow. Allport originally thought that perhaps 10% of church members would qualify as purely I, and that this inner experience of religion was related to the development of tolerance, while E was connected with prejudice (Allport, 1966; Allport & Ross, 1967, pp. 434–435; Reiss & Havercamp, 1998).

The **Multivariate Belief-Motivation Theory of Religiousness** (Schaefer & Gorsuch, 1992; see Section 1.4.6) predicts that religious motivation will have important interactions with beliefs, coping styles, and other important variables such as psychological well-being. This has been verified in a number of studies that have revealed intricate relationships. For instance, religious attendance has moderate positive correlations with I but not with E motivation. There is also a positive correlation between attendance and certain features of the God image (e.g.,

benevolent, guiding) and a negative relationship with other aspects (e.g., deistic). Other characteristics of the God image are unrelated to attendance. The complexity of the relationships between motivation and well-being can be seen in factor analyses, which have found I (but not E) related to positively worded well-being items but unrelated with existential well-being or religious/existential confusion (Eggers, 2003).

Attempts have been made to expand the concepts of I-E motivation, and revised scales of measurement have been developed that appear to be reliable in groups as young as fifth grade (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; Gorsuch & Venable, 1983). An early attempt at expansion was made by Allport and Ross, who argued in their later work that I and E motivation were not separate characteristics and that it was possible to be high or low in both, positions they labeled as **indiscriminately proreligious** and nonreligious, respectively. However, other researchers observed that high I individuals are similar in many ways to the indiscriminately proreligious, while high E persons resemble the nonreligious group, so this expansion of the I-E construct is not very helpful (Donahue, 1985). Researchers continue to be somewhat divided over whether it is better to think of E and I as motivation types at ends of a bipolar continuum, or independent and orthogonal characteristics. Kirkpatrick (1989) has argued for the latter view, but research has found that E and I are negatively correlated in groups like conservative Protestants, which supports the traditional bipolar or typological view (Saroglou, 2002).

A second expanded approach to religious motivation used factor analysis to refine the analysis of extrinsic motivation by breaking it into two subfactors—seeking rewards of personal security or comfort (Ep) or developing social relationships, gains, and rewards (Es). This distinction has been found meaningful in both US and UK studies, and appears in much of the work on religious motivation (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; Kirkpatrick, 1989; cf. Gorsuch, 1988; Maltby & Day, 2003). Some have argued that intrinsic motivation also has a social component and may help meet personal needs for companionship, so that it is inaccurate to characterize intrinsics as uninterested in rewards (Burris, Batson, Altstaedten, & Stephens, 1994)

A number of explanations have been proposed for the existence of intrinsic religiosity. Some investigators have argued that seeking religion "for its own sake" is really a search for the rewards that religion has to offer. However, this ignores the data that shows intrinsic motivation to be separate from extrinsic motivation. Gorsuch (1997) argues that intrinsic motivation may have multiple sources and that individuals raised in a religious faith may develop intrinsic motivation for different reasons than those who are later converts. Cognitive consistency with one's values and experiences, as well as emotional factors, are likely to be important.

A final major expansion to the theory has been made by Daniel Batson, who has proposed a third type of religious motivation known as **quest**. He describes this as a pattern that includes (1) a readiness to criticize self and to face complexity or existential questions, (2) perception of doubt as positive and resistance to clear-cut answers or commitments, and (3) openness to change (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991a; Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Saroglou, 2002; see Section 1.4.6).

Batson thought that quest comes from cognitive restructuring in response to existential questions, such as those provoked by a contemplation of death, tragedy, or contradiction in life, a connection that has been found in some studies (e.g., Krauss & Flaherty, 2001). He also argues that quest is a type of motivation completely separate from intrinsic or extrinsic religiosity, although some researchers have found evidence that it is modestly related to extrinsic motivation (Kojetin, McIntosh, Bridges, & Spilka, 1987; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2004). A helpful distinction has been made by Beck and Jessup (2004), who have identified two questing patterns—a soft quest marked by tentativeness and exploration within tradition, and a hard quest associated with doubt, negative emotions, less orthodoxy, and decreased well-being. It is this latter pattern that appears to be connected with lower values of intrinsic and higher values of extrinsic motivation.

There has been an extensive debate about the nature of quest. A fundamental issue is whether quest is a type of religious motivation or a personality characteristic. While quest does appear to be related to religious conflict and anxiety, quest scores are not much related to other measures of religion and spirituality. Quest motivation does have a relationship to a number of psychological factors including higher scores on cognitive complexity and the personality factor of openness to experience and lower scores on measures of prejudice or authoritarianism. This suggests that quest is really better thought of as a personality characteristic or a general reactive, negativistic stance that represents a resistance to identity foreclosure (Donahue, 1985; Simpson, Newman, & Fuqua, 2005; Burris, Jackson, Tarpley, & Smith, 1996; Saroglou, 2002; Futterman, Dillon, Garand, & Haugh, 1999; Klaassen & McDonald, 2002). Some UK research has suggested that quest is more about conflict and distress than searching for a religious or spiritual change (Joseph, Smith, & Diduca, 2002; cf. Kahn & Greene, 2004).

One area of debate has been whether the intrinsic or the quest styles of motivation are superior to each other. Research results on this question have been somewhat inconsistent, and interpretation of the findings depends in part on the values of each researcher and their conception of maturity. Early writers such as Alexander (1962) defined emotional maturity in terms of ability to become interested in things outside the self, so that things like intrinsic religiosity and altruism are highly desirable and superior to a self-centered quest. Other researchers argue that quest develops later in life than intrinsic or extrinsic religiosity and so is a more advanced type of motivation (Socha, 1996). Finding that individuals high in I also score higher on some measures of self-deception and impression management, and that Stage 5 development in Fowler's scheme is not associated with high I values could also be used to support the superiority of quest (Burris, 1994; James & Samuels, 1999). However, in a US study, Kristensen, Pedersen, and Williams (2001) looked at religious motivation and three components of attitude: affect, cognition, and conation (behaviors and intentions). They found that people high on quest had high scores on cognitive motivation but low scores on affect and conation, a pattern similar to those with a more extrinsic motivation. The authors argued that the dissociation of quest from behavior and intention suggests that it is not a good description of

spiritual maturity. These findings parallel other work that suggests quest is tied to cognitive motivations, I to seeking spiritual perfection and E to personal superiority (Grzymala-Moszczynska, 1996). Pargament (1997, p. 63) argues that all three orientations involve means and ends, just different ones. He argues that means are embedded for intrinsic, compartmentalized for extrinsic and complex, and conflictual for quest motivation, while ends are more relational for intrinsics, focused on status or safety for extrinsics, and about meaning or self-development for questers.

The concept of religious motivation has been a key one in the scientific study of religion and appears in many studies. While the I-E theory has generated interesting findings, some researchers like Kirkpatrick and Hood (1990) have been critical of it. These criticisms include following:

- The I-E model is conceptually flawed as the constructs are not clearly defined, have multiple meanings, are value-laden, and may relate more to personality.
- The scales used for research on religious orientation have measurement problems (cf. Griffin, Gorsuch, & Davis, 1987; Batson & Schoenrade, 1991b).
- The model is too simplistic in its attempt to reduce religious motivation to 2 or 3 categories and is not based on a strong theory (Reiss, 2000).
- Researchers often treat intrinsic or extrinsic religiosity as a type rather than a characteristic that varies from person to person or between groups (Lazar, Kravetz, & Frederich-Kedem, 2002).
- It does not describe a characteristic relevant to nonreligious people (Donahue, 1985; but see Rowatt & Schmitt, 2003).

As a result of these criticisms, religious motivation has become a less popular construct in scientific research on religion, and researchers have been actively looking at other explanatory frameworks. However, a large body of high quality research attests to the importance of motivation in explaining a number of important aspects and consequences of religion.

9.3.2 Cognitive Perspectives on Change and Development

Psychological theories of religious development, especially those that concentrate on childhood and adolescence, have frequently focused on factors related to cognition. These types of theories can also be found in the adult development literature. Two are especially important—postformal and rational choice theories.

9.3.2.1 Postformal Development Theory

Sinnott (1994, 1998, 2000) has argued that the growth in spirituality and mysticism during adulthood happens in tandem with cognitive changes that take place. According to Piaget, cognitive development ends in adolescence with the move to formal operations thinking and Aristotelian or scientific logic. Sinnott rejects this view, as he believes

that in adulthood people may move to a higher or postformal stage. This **postformal thought** or logic allows us to organize contradictory information that is encountered when one begins to deal with spiritual issues and is thus necessary for mature spiritual development. Instead of being rigidly limited to one system with certain interests and goals, postformal logic allows us recognize the limits of our perspective, accept the existence of paradox and inherent unknowability of certain things, and begin to see multiple possibilities. Some authors (e.g., Cook-Greuter, 2000; Cook-Greuter & Soulen, 2007) associate this kind of postformal thought with flexible systems of meaning-making that are found at transpersonal levels of development.

Postformal systems of thought are ideal for achieving balance and integration, both of which are central to spirituality. This is because postformal thought is more than just a form of logic. It is multimodal, involving emotions, as well as the logical mind, and it is multiperson and relational, developing in the context of our interpersonal experiences, our connections to others, and to God. It is a kind of cooperative cognition that involves the union of mind and emotion and allows judgment to be made on the basis of *either* or *both* depending on what is best for the particular time and context. As spiritual issues become more prominent during adult development, postformal thought supports the perception of multiple realities and unitive states of consciousness.

Postformal thought involves the ability to see that more than one type of reasoning system can be valid, and to see that dealing with a particular problem in different contexts may require different solutions. It sees problems as practical rather than abstract and that they should be understood more concretely with attention to both general features and those specific to the case. This type of reasoning is thus pragmatic and complex, able to see multiple causes and even paradoxical aspects operating in a problem. It allows for the creation of multiple goals and solutions, recognizes multiple methods that are possible approaches, picks one that is best, and takes ownership for it. This flexibility allows us to rise above conflicting truths and make choices appropriate to our situation.

Sinnott's theory is interesting and has some scattered support in the adult development literature on wisdom, which has some characteristics similar to postformal thought. His theory also has many parallels with postmodern and practice approaches to religion and spirituality (see Section 6.3.4). However, few people have begun to explore the theory, so empirical evidence for it remains limited.

9.3.2.2 Rational Choice Theory

A more popular theory has been **rational choice theory**, which involves the application of rational decision-making models from economics to the study of religion. The theory was pioneered by Lawrence Iannaccone (1990, 1995b), who argued that religion is something that produces products like personal satisfaction, as well as **compensators** or substitutes for desired rewards such as immortality. Since religion produces products, it is subject to laws of supply and demand and can be subjected to economic analysis (Iannaccone & Everton, 2004; Stark, 1997a). In his view, religious products such as satisfaction can be measured by looking at concrete variables

like denominational adherence. These can then be thought of as produced by money, scarce resources, and acquired skills or **human capital**, allowing for the development of complex quantitative explanatory models. The assumptions of this theory are that (1) people act rationally; (2) these rational decisions utilize cost-benefit analyses that are based on a fixed set of personal needs and preferences so that changes in behavior are because of changes in external constraints; (3) people choose actions that maximize benefits, sometimes with reference to the needs and wishes of others, as well as their own; and (4) because religious capital is acquired in a specific group, people avoid changing affiliation to prevent loss of value (Ellison, 1995; Iannaccone, 1990, 1997a).

Rational choice theory has been used to develop models about a couple of religious phenomena. First, it has been used to explain why religion in the US has remained strong, while European religion has followed the predictions of secularization theory and seen declining rates of participation. The rational choice model says that the free market style of US religion is responsible for its resilience against the corrosive effects of modern culture by promoting competition between different groups and keeping them strong. In this model, groups like Catholics are more successful in resisting secularization, because they maintain internal competition by allowing diversity (Finke, 1997). This is in contrast to secularization models like the sociopolitical conflict model (e.g., Martin, 1978), which says that European nonparticipation is not due to lack of competition but because of identification between government and religion, allowing religious nonadherence to become a form of social protest. There is significant evidence against both of these theories as an explanation for differences between Europe and the US, although the rational choice theory continues to attract interest (Gorski, 2003). It also goes against older theories such as those of Peter Berger (1967; Ammerman, 1997), which said that religious pluralism weakened rather than strengthened religion by questioning its truth, value, and plausibility.

Rational choice explanations have also been used to understand why conservative churches are growing in membership, while mainline churches are declining. In the view of Iannaccone (1996), conservative churches are growing and attract higher levels of financial commitment, because they are stricter and thus stronger. Strict churches are more distinctive or exclusive, distancing themselves from worldly and secular alternatives. Raising the level of commitment weeds out "free riders" that are less dedicated and take more from the organization than they give to it, and increased expectations attract enthusiastic members who participate and build up others. The removal of free riders and retention of committed ones increases resources and enhances the net benefits of membership, which leads to higher retention rates and more switching in from other less strict groups, a pattern that has been found in sociological studies and within denominations (Sherkat, 2001; Olson & Perl, 2001, 2005). The distinctiveness hypothesis is also supported by research that finds a negative relationship between market share and religious commitment (Perl & Olson, 2000). Of course, at some point strictness reaches a level where the cost is too great, and churches must moderate their demands; this level appears to vary for different groups (Iannaccone, 1994, 1997b; Neitz & Mueser, 1997). However, in a social climate not favorable to religion, liberal churches are more likely to lose

members than conservative ones because of their lower level of strictness (Wilson & Sherkat, 1994).

Given the focus on money in society, it is not surprising that economic metaphors and theories would eventually be used to study religion (Ammerman, 1997). However, rational choice theory has been subjected to a broad critique (e.g., Neitz & Mueser, 1997; Ammerman, 1997). Some of the objections raised about the theory are as follows:

1. The key idea of rational choice theory—that people make decisions on the basis of costs and benefits—does not allow us to make specific predictions or to rule out alternative explanations such as demand side theories or demographic changes (Bruce, 1993; Finke, 1997; Iannaccone, 1995a; Beyer, 1997; Perl & Olson, 2000). Instead, the theory is dependent upon other assumptions that are unsupported (Chaves, 1995)
2. It offers a limited definition of rationality and decision-making—economic and short term. This overlooks the possibility that loyalty to religion may be different from loyalty to a brand of coffee. A broader view of rationality will also consider meaning-making, values and emotional factors in decision-making and commitment (Demerath, 1995; Hechter, 1997; Bruce, 1993)
3. It ignores important relational, cultural, and social factors. Since it is culture that provides standards of value, it is impossible to understand decision-making about value without reference to culture (Ellison, 1995). Research also suggests that choices are not just due to cost and benefit but are also affected by social relations factors such as example setting, social sanctions, and what we think will please others. Rational choice needs to be combined with demand side theories if it is to adequately account for these factors (Sherkat & Wilson, 1995; Sherkat, 1997, 1998).
4. It ignores differences in the content of religious belief that appear to affect participation rates. For example, mainline denominations that are losing members are also those groups who have leaders that have become skeptical about basic Christian beliefs (Sherkat, 2001).
5. It ignores or minimizes the "nonrational" aspects to religion that may influence choices such as emotion, religious experience or mysticism, and the appeal of novelty (Young, 1997; Sherkat, 1997; Collins, 1997).
6. It does not explain important aspects of choices and changes in Europe, for instance why Nordic countries have low rates of attendance but strong support for finances and rituals, or why people are abandoning religion completely (Bruce, 2000; Marwell, 1996).

9.3.3 Narrative Perspectives on Stability and Change

Dissatisfaction with motivational and cognitive models of change and stability has opened the door to the consideration of new approaches to understanding development. One of the most important of these is narrative theory. Modern

narrative theory in psychology goes beyond the early work of writers like Erikson or Freud and includes material from cognitive psychology (e.g., Bruner, 1986, 1991), analyses of literary and historical theory (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1988), and personality theory (e.g., McAdams, 1997; Singer & Bluck, 2001). Its application in developmental theory fits well with what has been called the contextual turn in research (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1977), and it has links to postmodern and practice understandings of the human person (see Section 6.3). It also has attracted the interest of theologians (e.g., Stroup, 1981), making it an interesting framework for considering development from both psychological and religious perspectives.

Narrative theorists argue that humans have two modes of representation, *propositional* or scientific and *narrative* (Bruner, 1986, p. 11). Scientific thought is rational and is good at manipulating abstract ideas but tends to be inefficient for responding to particular situations in everyday practical life. On the other hand, **narrative** is more about human action as embodied and lived experience. It is experiential, intuitive, creative, and emotionally engaging, focusing more on procedures than ideas. It is thus more the kind of reasoning that actually motivates most human action; we are story-telling animals that judge what we are to do by the stories we inhabit. As a result, a narrative theory should have inherent advantages in helping us to understand many aspects of the human person (Epstein, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1988, pp. 125, 142; Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992; MacIntyre, 1984, p. 216).

Psychologists and other narrative theorists note that narrative thinking in individuals has a number of important specific functions. Along with adding meaning to events (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2001), narrative brings integration and harmony to our inner world and thoughts through organization of memory and emotions. Along with other dispositions and characteristic patterns of behavior, these form the basis of our character, personality, and identity (McAdams, 1996, 2001; see Section 6.3.3). Narrative also has a practical role in understanding and planning practical action in space and time (see Section 7.1.1). It thus helps to internalize moral principles and provide guidance about moral choices in concrete situations (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 117–125; Crossley, 2000, pp. 47–51; Vitz, 1990; cf. Ricoeur, 1992). It is especially helpful in planning action, because stories contain an imagined future or goal for our action, preserving the temporal component of action so that it is easy to see the importance of the process of working toward a goal and not just attaining it (McAdams, 2001; Sommer & Baumeister, 1998).

9.3.3.1 Narrative Elements and Framework

Organization of information in life narratives has four primary characteristics. First, experiences and memories are arranged *temporally* in chronological sequences using **emplotment**. It thus involves more than a focus on the moment (Farb et al., 2007). The plot organizes events and shows connections; the ordering provides interpretations and explanations for why things happened and the

meaning, worth, and purpose of events. The narrative is also **teleological**, pointing toward the goal of the story, showing the possible consequences to action, as well as the reactions they trigger. Narrative thus considers the relational connections to action (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988, pp. 18–19, 60; McAdams, 1996, pp. 25–26).

Second, narrative focuses upon *uniqueness* or **particularity**; each event and its context are thought to be special in some way and never able to be exactly repeated. This is true in part, because the temporal positioning of two events and their context can never be the same. The particularity of the event and the context influences the interpretation (Bruner, 1991; Ganzevoort, 1994). This way of thinking is somewhat different from the stage theory view of development, which emphasizes similarities of events between people rather than their particularity.

Third, narrative constructions of life are generally *complex.* Even within the narrative structure, people have different styles (e.g., in terms of richness or thinness of description) and tell the story at different levels of involvement (e.g., protagonist, narrator, or reader; Randall, 1995). A key feature of personal narratives is that they are **multivocal**, and there is typically not a single story or voice. Rather, there are multiple story lines and voices that may be incompatible or are in tension and dialogue with each other (de Certeau, 1984, p. 125; Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Josephs, 2003; Hermans et al., 1992; Toomela, 2003; cf. Bakhtin, 1981, p. 45). So while narrative helps to bring unity to events, it does not necessarily provide a neat and tidy framework, a single deep plot by which a narrative proceeds (Polkinghorne, 1988, pp. 78, 112).

Finally, narrative organization *presumes a space-time setting* or **chronotype** and a cultural background that provide organizing centers for the narrative. Some chronotypes are biographical in nature and depict people moving through a whole life course, while others have a structure that views life sequences in terms of concepts like beginning or guilt and redemption, providing a different feel to events (Bakhtin, 1981). This background also includes (1) assumptions about the culture, practices, and community within which the narrative takes place and (2) a personal ideology or **worldview** that has ideas about how the world works and how life should be lived (Bruner, 1991; MacIntyre, 1984, p. 220; de St. Aubin, 1999; Tomkins & Demos, 1995).

Life narratives involve memory for events and a winnowing process by which some things are selected and others left out. Thus they are based on facts but they are also constructions (McAdams, 1996; Crossley, 2000, p. 52). Research suggests that memory for autobiographical events is fairly good so that the process of constructing a narrative is more about selection and interpretation of events rather than distortion (McAdams, 2001). When combined into a narrative these events then help to direct and sustain action (Pillemer, 2001; Ganzevoort, 1994). These events include the following:

- *Originating events* that set a person on a particular life course
- *Anchoring events* that provide a cornerstone for ideology and belief
- *Transitional events* that direct the person and provide life lessons
- *Crisis or limit events* that cannot be understood within the context of the story and force a reappraisal and new understanding through inner and social dialogue

Populating the narrative are characters, representations of the person, and others in action. These characters are typically built around **imagoes** or idealized concepts of the self or other person (McAdams, 1996). Emotions are also interwoven into the narrative. They are important as they help engage us and add meanings and evaluative qualities to stories. They constitute a language within narrative, either connected to memories or directed to the future or values. These can be emotions related to a specific episode or extended in time, for example, life as bitter or sweet (Goldie, 2004; Ruth & Vilkko, 1996).

9.3.3.2 Development of Narrative

McAdams (1996, 2001) and other scholars believe that narrative abilities develop in a consistent fashion during various periods of life. While some authors trace the beginning of narrative to late preschool years (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1988, pp. 112, 160; Bluck & Habermas, 2001), McAdams argues it begins in early childhood around or before age 2 when autobiographical memory begins to emerge. This early period is a prenarrative one where others stimulate our memory, and we begin to develop our **narrative tone**—the general form of optimism or pessimism our stories will take. We begin to learn about the expected features of stories from imagery and examples in our culture or faith tradition, for instance, through hearing or reading children's stories. As childhood progresses, this cultural learning becomes more detailed, and we learn specific features of stories—patterns of goals and how they are pursued, as well as possible *master narratives* that can be used as examples of how life stories are constructed. These master narratives are critical in traditional societies as the basis for expected life narratives, while in postmodern societies people must construct their own patterns. In adolescence, these master narratives might become the basis of the first true **narrative identity**, as people acquire the beliefs and values necessary to construct an identity, and reflect upon important episodes in their life that can form materials for their own story (Fig. 9.2).

Research suggests that our narrative changes across the life span. Especially important is a time known as the memory or *reminiscence bump*—a period from about age 15 to 25, when most people have more memory for autobiographical events. At different times during the life span we tend to work on different aspects of story. After an emphasis on identity and thematic coherence in adolescence, early and middle adulthood narrative work tends to focus on our self-imagoes. In middle age, work begins anew on created coherence in life narratives, producing a generativity script that leads to new beginnings in our life story and the lives of others. Reflection on this narrative is thought to be particularly acute in later adulthood when we engage in **life review**, an integrative remembering that includes critical analysis of our life story and what we have done. With increasing age, these life reviews tend to become more positive, and while they are focused on the past, the life narratives of most individuals continue to have a forward-looking component (Pillemer, 2001; Staudinger, 2001; Bluck & Habermas, 2001).

Fig. 9.2. *Dan McAdams.* One of the world's leading personality psychologists, McAdams has pioneered the use of narrative as a conceptual and research tool for studying personality and adult development. Photo courtesy of Dan McAdams

9.3.3.3 Narrative, Religion, and Spiritual Autobiography

Narrative theory provides a way of approaching spiritual or religious thinking and development. Narrative techniques can help us understand our spiritual life, and narrative also offers a way of understanding and facilitating narrative change. Narrative is effective for a number of reasons:

1. Narrative deals with issues of unity, meaning and coherence, and prominent themes in religious and spiritual development. Its framework for conceptualizing the problems of authenticity and the failure of any single human narrative to encompass life are powerful ways of understanding religious and spiritual struggles (Irwin, 2002, pp. 87–133).
2. It allows us to conceptualize and understand the meaning of a spiritual or religious journey. MacIntyre (1984, p. 219) argues that it is the narrative quest for a *telos* or goal that brings unity to life. This goal need not be fully clear at the beginning of the journey, part of the quest may include the discovery of a worthy goal to pursue. However, this goal and the journey itself both have meaning and are revealed in narrative. Religions are rich with possible master narratives and visions for character and life goals that can help shape our own narratives

(Frank, 2004). Narrative also helps us understand the meaning of our life narratives, how we discover them and how they motivate action. In this framework, virtues and practices described by religious traditions are things that will sustain us in the quest described by our narrative.

3. Since narrative taps the experiential system rather than the rational system (Epstein, 1994), it is able to encompass the meaning aspect of the religious life, the subjective quality of spiritual or mystical experiences, and the postformal sense of paradox they bring with them.
4. Narrative does an excellent job of portraying relationality by showing how characters and their actions influence and affect each other. In older adults, the communal aspect of narrative promotes interdependence and self-worth in the face of suffering, a good alternative to late life dependency or isolated individualism (Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999, pp. 129–133). The dialogical interchange between figures in narrative is especially appropriate for religion, as in dialogues with God or other exchanges with religious significance (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 351).

Spiritual Autobiographies. One way that narrative can be helpful in the process of religious development is through the writing of a **spiritual autobiography**. This is an autobiographical document that traces the movement of spiritual and religious changes in a person's life so that they can understand more about their past and present situation, and gain ideas about future directions that might be followed. It may be particularly helpful for people in transitional times, helping them gain a sense of control or direction and thus increasing their spiritual well-being (Hateley, 1984).

A small but important literature exists on how to construct spiritual narratives and autobiographical accounts for use in personal reflection and growth (Peace 1998a, 1998b; Crossley, 2000; Progoff, 1980, 1992). These authors suggest that development of an autobiography proceeds in stages, and much of the work takes place prior to doing any writing. During an initial preparation period, the writer determines the purpose of the autobiography and who will be its intended readers. Examining examples of spiritual autobiographies or memoirs written by others (e.g., Augustine, 1992; Lewis, 1955) can provide helpful ideas. It is important to frame the project in such a way that it deals with important issues like self-honesty and past hurts but not to attempt a narrative that would be too large or emotionally overwhelming. Next comes a collection phase when the author gathers materials through prayer, reflection, and guided imagery. These materials should include (a) important experiences such as *originating events*, a point of call where God entered our life for the first time or in a new way, (b) special *experiences of presence* or empowerment—religious or mystical experiences, (c) *connecting experiences* that link us to others or tie together different aspects of our life, (d) *anchoring events* important for development of our ideology or beliefs, and (e) *crisis events*, disappointments, and disillusionments. The latter can include visions that we have about ourselves and our lives that seem partly true but do not fit comfortably. When collecting these materials it is important not to edit or exclude things that seem to be

important, and it is also essential to focus on not just what happened but the meaning and emotion connected to the events and experiences.

Once the preparatory work is mostly complete, the author can begin to write the autobiography. While the document can be structured with separate sections for themes or important influences, it is usually organized temporally around a structuring timeline of at most a dozen or so life periods or phases. Each of these periods should have a unity and unique character. They are defined in part by **boundary events**—important experiences or changes in ways of looking at things that occurred at a particular time. The autobiography should describe each period in some detail. Things to be considered could include (a) experiences, crises, and growth outcomes; (b) key people, activities, creative involvements or ideas; (c) internal and external events, including physical health; and (d) tests or challenges for each period or transition. Also described should be turning points, steppingstones that move a person in a new direction and transitional or **hinge events**. While narrative typically focuses on choices made and their consequences, it can also be important to describe paths *not* taken, especially if strong emotions are connected to them. The journal can also include imaginative pieces such as dialogues with others or God, a summary testament and possible future scripts, as well as a final reflection on the process of writing the journal.

Spiritual Change Through Narrative. The advantage to the constructed nature of narrative is that as adults we can choose to rethink our personal narrative though self-reflection or collaboration with others (Irwin, 2002; Crossley, 2000, pp. 59–62). We can rewrite the self through an Augustinian process of recognizing that all is not well, distancing ourselves from the narrative to locate problems, articulating new possibilities, and then appropriating the changes through our actions. These new narratives may be less negative and self-defeating, helping us confront responsibilities and plan effectively. They can help us appreciate the good aspects of life and accept forgiveness (Freeman, 1993, pp. 44–45; Magee, 2001). Religious narratives can make use of new or altered religious symbols. It might also be possible to develop standards that would help us evaluate religious narratives and pinpoint areas for needed change. McAdams (1996) has proposed a number of categories for judgment—coherence, openness, credibility, differentiation, reconciliation, and generative integration.

Narrative theory highlights two problems that may be barriers to constructive change. First, it is possible for stories to be deceptive, where the story lacks congruence with the events and characters it contains. This often appears as inconsistencies in stories (Sarbin, 1986). Such narratives are problematic because in order to motivate action and produce transformation, stories must have credibility (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 148–149). Second, it is possible that a person may not make choices among stories (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 154). In postmodern society, people may use multiple narratives in different situations and so have no true identity (Gergen, 1991), leading to the development of identity disorders. These problems are especially acute in narratives that contain much suffering or tragedy and are inherently difficult (Gabriel, 2004).

9.3.3.4 Critique

As we have seen, a narrative approach to religious and spiritual development has much potential. Its use is only beginning in research, primarily in qualitative studies. The use of narrative may help address gaps in the literature, including subtle but important differences in the meaning of religious terms and issues that are largely untreated or not easily conceptualized using reductionistic models. Some possible topics might include gender effects on spirituality, development of wisdom, issues of meaning, or understanding the communal and relational context of development (Blieszner & Ramsey, 2002; Levenson & Crumpler, 1996). On a practical level, narrative work can help people identify features of their spiritual life and directions for possible change. The study of positive narratives can help people find models for successful aging, providing inspiration and instilling hope (Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999, pp. 125–127).

A narrative approach also has limitations and potential problems. Human thought *can* be representational, working with images or descriptions, as well as stories, and this other kind of thinking also offers strengths when it comes to systematic tasks (Russell & Lucariello, 1992). Also, narrative like any single approach tends to concentrate more on certain aspects of human experience like the unity and coherence of the human life, at the expense of other things like the nature of the self who does the narrating (Loewenstein, 1991). The effects of culture on narrative are also relatively unknown. For example, does narrative mean the same thing in cultures that have cyclic views of time in contrast to our own linear perspective (Crossley, 2000, p. 54)? These are important questions that will need to be addressed, as narrative work becomes a more prominent model in the study of religious and spiritual development.

9.4 Religion and Spirituality in Older Adulthood

Psychologists refer to the period of life beginning in the mid-50s and following midlife as **older adulthood**. Two visions of this time of life can be found in Western culture. The traditional view found in Christianity, and shared by many other religious traditions, is that the later years can be a time of great accomplishment in religious life. In this view, aging is seen in a positive light (Lyon, 2004). In contrast to this, the modernist view that has been influential in psychology is that older adulthood is a time of "senescing" or downward development, a return to a kind of second infancy (e.g., Levinson, 1996, p. 21; Hall, 1905, p. vi). In contemporary Western societies, one of the goals of older adults is to not be older (!), to try to escape the physical and other changes that happen naturally during the aging process (Katz, 1995; Hummel, Rey, & d'Epinay, 1995).

Actually, there are positive and negative elements of older adulthood, and both have vital connections to spiritual and religious development. If spirituality represents a search for the sacred in connectedness and meaning, then older adulthood is clearly a prime time for spiritual development. Older adults must cope

with a number of physical, emotional, relational, or existential losses and changes (Leder, 1996). These challenge the individual to maintain a sense of meaning and hope in the face of loss and potential or actual disability. They also call the person to maintain relationships rather than surrender to isolation (MacKinlay, 2001). In this view, successful aging might be thought of as maintaining meaningful life in the face of declines and challenges (Wong, 1998a). Spirituality involves a struggle to persevere, reframe worldviews to explain and cope with suffering, and maintain a sense of balance and self-reliance. Thus, there is a close connection between spirituality and the search for meaning in old age and the ability to be resilient in the face of life's challenges (Sorajjakool, 1998; Wagnild & Young, 1990; Langer, 2004). Exactly how these changes are viewed is strongly influenced by cultural attitudes toward aging and the body, which tend to be quite negative in Western cultures (Lyon, 2004).

Despite the obvious connections between spirituality, religion, and issues of older adulthood, research in the area is somewhat sparse, and a theoretical framework has been lacking (Payne, 1990). However, recent research has begun to identify the importance of religion and spirituality during this period of life. For instance, prayer and communal religious activities have been found to be a central practice and way of coping for older adults, particularly for US minority groups like African Americans (Armstrong & Crowther, 2002). High rates of religious participation and practice have also been found in older US Hispanics, particularly women, with over 3/4 engaging in prayer at least once a day and reporting that their religious faith was very helpful in dealing with life problems (Magee, 2001). In these groups, as well as in the current cohort of older adults in the US and other countries, religious practices and spirituality are strongly related (cf. Musick et al., 2000). In a recent qualitative study, older Lutheran women in the US and Germany reported that the emotional and relational support found in a religious community was an important part of their resiliency that helped them maintain a rich and meaningful life, while coping with issues of aging (Blieszner & Ramsey, 2002; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000).

However, aging is more than coping; there are also potential gains to be claimed in older adulthood. These could include a freedom to relax defenses, reveal inner thoughts and redefine one's status, enabling us to establish positive dependencies and a new, generative creativity. The focus of life can shift from preoccupation with the future to living well in the present, finding a new assurance of order, meaning, and purpose (Pruyser, 1975; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986; McFadden, 1999). Older adulthood can also be a time to find new standards and perspectives by which to evaluate one's life. Some researchers have found that older adults often move away from narcissism to a more transcendent perspective in later life, with corresponding changes in attitudes and relationships. This includes a move away from a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world toward one that involves connectedness, appreciation of mystery, authenticity, and an emphasis on relationships. This change is accompanied by increases in life satisfaction, and some authors suggest that it is related to the development of postformal ways of thought (Bertman, 1999; Tornstam, 1997, 1999; Grams, 2001). Certainly older adulthood is not a time for

declining religious interest; even when attendance declines due to health or other problems, religiousness and engagement in private devotional practices will generally continue (Sorajjakool, 1998).

One possible gain that can be claimed in older adulthood is accepting and making peace with the past. Religious ideas of forgiveness and practices of confession or Ignatian examen (see Sections 11.4.1 and 13.3.4) can assist in this process, as can techniques of spiritual life review that help us recall incidents from the past, confront our responsibility, and give or accept forgiveness (Lewis, 2001; Magee, 2001; Moberg, 2002b). Accepting the past does not mean resolving every troubling situation or trying to have no regrets by claiming we would do everything the same way—including our mistakes! Also, some situations are not resolvable, because others are involved and reconciliation cannot be achieved. However, we can relish happy memories and present painful ones to God. We "die" to our past in a potentially positive way, if we are able to say with our whole heart that we renounce our mistakes and would do things differently if we had the opportunity (Hughes, 1999; Anthony, 1999).

There are striking similarities and a few differences in how older adults of different religious traditions engage in spiritual pursuits. In a study with Moslem, Hindu, and Christian older adults in Singapore, Mehta (1997) found all groups made extensive use of spiritual practices such as prayer or meditation to deal with problems of aging. Moslem and Christian older adults engaged in a number of regular communal practices such as worship or prayer times. Hindus were less focused on issues of morality and conduct, while Moslems were more concerned about holding themselves as role models for a younger generation.

9.4.1 End of Life Issues

Older adults confront death and dying in a couple of ways. First, if one is privileged to live into old age, one will witness the disability and death of many family members and friends. Married women will most likely experience the death of their spouse. Second, one must eventually confront and experience one's own mortality. Religion and spirituality enter into both these situations.

Many studies have associated religiosity with a positive role in coping with the disability and death of others. For instance, qualitative studies with caregivers of family members suffering from Alzheimer's disease have found that Christian beliefs, religious practices like prayer, and social support were all helpful in dealing with the demands of caring for an increasingly disabled loved one. Caregivers reported three helpful aspects of their faith: (1) *beliefs* (e.g., the idea that God has a plan and things happen for reason) that helped construct a framework bringing meaning and purpose to the situation; (2) *ethical injunctions*, such as the call to do good and values like a positive outlook; and (3) *optimism*, making the most of situations. These caregivers did not find the distinction between religion and spirituality to be meaningful (Stuckey 2003, 2001).

Bereavement or the loss of a loved one through death is a major event related to negative physical and psychological changes. However, most people find that religious beliefs and support, as well as rituals like funerals offer considerable help. These do not always provide help with immediate coping or buffer the person from the pain of the loss, but they are strongly associated with better long-term outcomes. Research in both the US and UK suggests that religious beliefs are associated with better resolution after bereavement and a lower incidence of delayed or complicated grief, including depression or other psychological problems. These latter difficulties are connected with a view of death as a meaningless event and high levels of attempted self-reliance. There is also a greater possibility of positive spiritual changes as the person works to resolve feelings of loss and find new roles in life. Religious beliefs and practices are thought to be associated with positive outcomes and process in bereavement because (1) these beliefs help support feelings of comfort and guidance as well as a sense of both personal and divine control; (2) afterlife beliefs make death a meaningful event, reducing questioning or blaming of God which is associated with less well-being; and (3) religion increases social support which reinforces positive beliefs. There is an especially strong correlation between hope produced by religious faith and grief resolution. Some research has also indicated that roughly half of bereaved individuals report some kind of positive and reassuring continuing contact with the deceased person (Frantz, Trolley, & Johil, 1996; Walsh, King, Jones, Tookman, & Blizard, 2002; Balk, 1999; Wuthnow, Christiano, & Kuzlowski, 1980; Spilka & Bridges, 1989; Herth, 1990; Golsworthy & Coyle, 1999).

The evidence is more mixed regarding the positive effects of religious belief on fears about one's own mortality. The approach of death intensifies the process of separation and loss which is a prominent feature of older adulthood, but religious traditions have beliefs about life after death that look beyond these losses (Barbre, 2004). In general, belief in eternal life is correlated with higher levels of well-being. Spiritually mature individuals have more confidence and positive attitudes toward death, and individuals higher in intrinsic religious motivation have lower levels of death anxiety (Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; Thomas, 1994; Thorson & Powell, 2000). However, Dillon and Wink (2007, p. 199) found in their developmental studies that the lowest levels of death anxiety were found in both the very religious and nonreligious members of their sample, with the highest levels of anxiety in the middle religiousness group.

9.4.2 Religious Perspectives on Older Adulthood and Aging

Although there is a diversity of opinion within and between religious traditions on issues of aging (Firth, 1999), in general they have tended to view later life as offering the possibility of great spiritual accomplishments and wisdom. The Hindu view of older adulthood has been briefly discussed previously (see Section 7.2.2); here we look at a Christian perspective on the topic.

Contemporary Christian views of spirituality and aging are formulated in opposition to modernist attitudes toward older adulthood. In the view of religious writers and critics, societal attitudes in the West toward aging are based on three presuppositions:

1. *Aging is a problem.* Since late 19th century, and the increasing dominance of positivist and modernist attitudes, aging has been seen as a process of decline with decreasing potential for growth. In this view, aging represents a failure in biological material processes leading to decay, dependency, and death (Stoneking, 2003; Shuman, 2003; Hauerwas & Yordy, 2003; Leder, 1996).
2. This problem is especially acute because *the worth of persons is dependent upon qualities or capabilities of the individual that are affected by the aging process*, such as our cognitive skills and our ability to produce or consume. For instance, in his early work, Engelhardt (1986) argued that personhood is defined by our ability to be rational, free, and self-conscious moral agents so that humans with impaired cognitive ability or limited ability to act freely are not really persons, as in the case of those with dementia (McNamara, 2002; Jones & Jones, 2003).
3. Since aging is a set of physical and medical problems, *the "problem" of aging can be solved through technology.* In this view, modern experts familiar with scientific knowledge and technology know more about all aspects of aging than ordinary people or our predecessors, who often follow traditional practices and beliefs that are mistaken (Stoneking, 2003). We should follow the lead of technical experts who can develop solutions for the medical problem of aging using scientific techniques of explanation, control and management (McNamara, 2002; Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989). In this view, images and attitudes about aging and its meaning are separated from the "facts" of the aging process and the technology used to solve its problems, so the answers to the problems of aging may be developed independently of questions of meaning or value.

Contemporary Christian writers have attempted to offer a corrective response to this position. While valuing many of the contributions of modern science and medicine, they also argue the following:

1. *Aging is good, although the suffering connected with aging should be opposed.* Christian thinkers generally see aging as a separate issue from things connected with older adulthood like suffering and death. Life is thought to be a gift of God and of fundamental value, and continued life allows for continued opportunities for growth and service. However, longevity for its own sake is not necessarily the highest good, a short life can be well lived, while a long one can be senseless or even toxic (McNamara, 2002; Hays & Hays, 2003).

Suffering can sometimes be connected with aging and is to be opposed (Aers, 2003; Buddhaghosa, 1999, p. 508). However, contrary to the hedonistic perspective (cf. Section 11.1.2), aging in the presence of suffering can continue to be meaningful. Spiritually mature people with poor health often report high levels of life satisfaction and transcendence over suffering, and common problems can lead to hope, intimacy, and growth. It is loss of meaning and hope in the face of suffering

that leads to depression, isolation, and loss of freedom. One of the key functions of religious traditions is to nurture that hope (MacKinlay, 2001, 2002; McNamara, 2002; Thomas, 1991; Stoneking, 2003; Meador & Henson, 2003).

2. *Our worth is not reduced by the aging process or problems related to old age.* In the Christian view, human persons are essentially relational creatures and find their meaning in relation to others and to God. These connections are the essence of Christian spirituality, and they do not vanish with aging or disability (Jernigan, 2001). The limitation in community participation due to old age and poor health is a significant issue (Maldonado, 1994), but even those with reduced participation or serious cognitive impairments such as found in Alzheimer's disease remain and can feel part of the community; they can respond to visits or participate in rituals and other community events. If community is thought of from a narrative perspective as a group of people who make a common story together, even very impaired individual can participate in storytelling or just be part of the story (MacKinlay, 2001, 2002; Firth, 1999; Jeeves, 1997, p. 67; Idler, Kasl, & Hays, 2001).
3. *Technological answers cannot solve all of the "problems" related to aging and in fact they can create new difficulties.* While medical technology can certainly prolong life, and in many cases improve its quality, some problems cannot be solved in this way. In fact, because technology has trouble dealing with issues of meaning, it can miss the distinction between caring for the body and just trying to perpetuate it with machines and technology, leading to various well-known ethical conundrums and sometimes making the situation worse rather than better. These kinds of situations illustrate the impossibility of completely separating facts from values and issues of meaning (Hendricks, 1986, p. 127).

In aging, one must identify what cannot be lost (our status as a human person), mourn but not be overly concerned about what must be accepted (our mortality or limitations and the suffering that goes with them), and find realistic possibilities. This is a difficult transition; we cannot bring back the past and try to do things we are no longer able to do. Instead, facing our limitations and accepting help improves our quality of life and can actually help us maintain our functioning and independence. This is a contemplative stance to the problem of dependency that allows us to surrender control to others as needed and receive graciously what we get from them (Cloutier, 2003; Jernigan, 2001; Anthony, 1999; Hendricks, 1986, pp. 129–135; McNamara, 2002; cf. Section 11.3.1). Modern society with its value of autonomous individualism resists this approach out of concern about being a burden to others. However, all of us are dependent on others throughout our lives and will be burdens on many occasions (Shuman & Meador, 2003, p. 132). Finitude before God means that we can yield to this reality and be guided by it without loss of dignity (Lash, 1996, p. 243).

Christian thinkers typically see community as providing a necessary aspect of care that cannot be done by technology. In the Christian conception, community is important because it provides (1) a context for care of spiritual and physical needs

(Aers, 2003); (2) ideals and practices that treat aging in a positive manner, allowing people to care and be cared for (Shuman, 2003); (3) a context for cross-generational friendships that enrich life (Hauerwas & Yordy, 2003); and (4) a role for the elderly in maintaining memory, which is essential for community life and identity, both communal and personal (Lysaught, 2003).

9.5 Conclusion

Key issue: *Traditional psychological views of development based on positivist and reductive naturalist assumptions may be inadequate to understand some aspects of adult spiritual development. Religious and narrative perspectives may offer correctives to this problem.*

The psychology and religion dialogue on adult spiritual and religious development is still in its infancy. Conversations to date highlight differences in opinion about the goals, trajectory, and diversity of spiritual or religious development. However, several broad conclusions can be drawn from the literature:

1. While it may be possible to speak of an ideal goal of development, it is certainly not the case that everyone ends up in the same place. Some people end their lives with profound spirituality, while others ignore or are openly hostile to such development.
2. Given the vast differences in end points of religious and spiritual development, it seems likely that different individuals may have quite different developmental trajectories. This is particularly true of development during adulthood. While these pathways may often be influenced by common factors like attachment or religious motivation, it is quite likely that these factors operate in different ways or configurations, and that individuals may also have unique influences that are important. A corollary to this is that naturalistic models emphasizing hard-and-fast laws of development will fail to capture essential features of spiritual and religious journeys (cf. Vergote, 1969, pp. 22, 285).
3. Given the observed diversity in developmental outcomes and paths, models that allow for flexibility and diversity are worthy of special consideration as ways of understanding development. Thus, while traditional approaches that try to identify common mechanisms and processes will continue to be important, newer approaches like narrative offer an important corrective that helps us appreciate the rich variety of religious and spiritual life.

Spiritual and religious processes of development are an important part of the human experience. They also can have important effects on the physical and mental health of the individual, topics to which we now turn.