

## Chapter 29

# Positive Psychology in the Context of Religious Communities



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It is surprising that psychology—literally the “study of the soul”—does not seem to have a natural affinity for religious communities, where the life of the soul has been considered and nurtured for millennia. Instead, research suggests that psychologists are less likely to participate in a faith tradition than most of the general population (Shafranske & Cummings, 2013; Vieten & Lukoff, 2022), with some taking a confrontational approach to religious leaders and alleging religious leaders’ perceived inadequacies in providing care for people with emotional needs (McMinn et al., 2005). Many explanations have been offered to help capture the nuances behind historic tensions between religion and psychology (or even between religion and science in general)—a topic that is beyond the scope of this chapter but is addressed elsewhere in this book (see Davis et al., Chap. 1, this volume; Nelson & Canty, Chap. 2, this volume; Porter et al., Chap. 3, this volume). However, rather than focus on these areas of conflict, our premise is instead to suggest and expand on how these two communities (i.e., the psychological community and religious communities) would both benefit from greater collaboration with each other.

Before we enter into this discussion in earnest, we would like to first raise an important caveat—namely, that our use of the term *religious communities* may in fact hold different meaning or salience across different faith traditions. For example, within the Hindu tradition, Hinduism is understood to be more than a religion—it is a culture in and of itself, with practices and beliefs commonly integrated into all aspects of individual and community life (Hodge, 2004; see Singh et al., Chap. 13, this volume). Thus, the demarcation between those aspects of life that are understood to fall *within* the context of one’s religious community and those that fall

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*outside* one's religious community may be much more fluid for some adherents, relative to others who are affiliated with faith traditions in which the categories of sacred and secular are modally less overlapping and/or are understood to be mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, with this important caveat in mind, we move forward with our case for positive psychology as a fertile context for greater collaboration between scientific and religious communities.

## **Collaborative Opportunities with Positive Psychology**

Recent Gallup poll findings suggest that—for the first time since the polling began in the 1930s—less than half of Americans hold membership in a religious community (Jones, 2021). Throughout the twentieth century, the rate of membership in a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple hovered around 70%. However, this figure has dropped steadily during the twenty-first century to the current rate of 47%. Although this trend has garnered attention about the decline of religion in America, it is also noteworthy that nearly half of Americans still belong to religious communities. This reality arguably makes collaboration with religious communities one of the most optimal vehicles for promoting people's mental health and for disseminating psychological science into American society. At 47%, membership in religious communities is approximately twice the rate of Americans who attend school (Schmidt, 2018). Apart from American political parties, one would be hard-pressed to find any U.S. social institution that involves such a high percentage of the population. Given how high religious importance and service attendance are in many other regions of the world (especially countries in Africa, South America, and South Asia; Pew Research Center, 2018), this potentiality is likely reflected in numerous cultures worldwide.

We offer several reflections on ways that positive psychology may be helpful in promoting collaboration between psychological and religious communities. These include caring for the emotionally wounded, cultivating virtue and purpose, and promoting human flourishing.

### ***Caring for the Emotionally Wounded***

To begin, consider how society cares for those who are marginalized and wounded. In times of distress and loss, a vast number of individuals request help from clergy, often instead of seeking treatment from mental health professionals (Stanley et al., 2001). For example, Ellison et al. (2006) reported that over half (56.7%) of those who frequently attend religious services view religious leaders as their first or second option when facing a mental health problem. One option in response to this tendency—an option unfortunately chosen with surprising frequency—is for psychologists to aver the inadequacies of clergy in providing care for people with

emotional needs (McMinn et al., 2005). Yet this condescending reaction to clergy providing human services minimizes the long historical tradition of pastoral care, the often spiritual nature of recovery and growth, and the various obstacles people experience in seeking care from licensed professionals (religious/spiritual considerations notwithstanding; Worthington & Scott, 1983).

Moreover, engaging in a turf battle over who best provides mental healthcare in times of need seems to minimize the importance of preventive community care that may naturally occur in the context of religious communities. Positive psychology is particularly pertinent in this regard. Edwards et al. (1999) detail several ways that psychologists and religious leaders can collaborate, such as workshops to promote specific and general well-being, congregational assessment, offering care to high-risk populations, and public education efforts. More detailed explorations of systematic collaborations, such as those by Benes et al. (2000) and Milstein et al. (2010), demonstrate how psychologists can cooperate with and support the work of clergy to enhance the access and quality of human services (rather than competing or quibbling about who should be providing which services in the first place). But beyond the issue of human services, a collaborative understanding of psychology and religion—especially one that is cultivated through collaboration between psychological and religious communities—opens the possibilities of authentic, constructive dialogue and genuine, mutual respect in our shared pursuit of big questions concerning matters of human existence. These include the meanings and mechanisms of flourishing, purpose, character/virtue, and lives well-lived—matters that are both promoted in positive psychology interventions and grounded deeply in religious/spiritual teachings and traditions (Rye et al., 2013). Indeed, such big questions transcend the scope and expertise of any single field or community; the very nature of the task calls for (and even requires) interdisciplinary, intercommunity collaboration (Milstein et al., 2010, 2017).

### *Cultivating Virtue and Purpose*

Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of mental health alludes to a meaning-making process that is central to most religious and spiritual ways of understanding self, others, and the world (Slattery & Park, 2011; see Park & Van Tongeren, Chap. 6, this volume). Over the two decades since the "birth" of positive psychology, hundreds of positive psychology articles and books have been published. Many (perhaps most) of them, focus on topics of interest to both psychological and religious communities—well-being (Seligman, 2011), spiritual experiences (Lambert et al., 2013), lovingkindness (Frederickson et al., 2008), wisdom (McLaughlin et al., 2017), and forgiveness (Griffin et al., 2019), just to name a few. Moreover, rigorous longitudinal empirical studies have tied religious service participation to numerous aspects of human flourishing, including mental and physical health, happiness and life satisfaction, character and virtue, and meaning and purpose (VanderWeele, 2017; see Long & VanderWeele, Chap. 25, this volume).

Although these topics can provide fertile contexts for dialogue and mutual learning, perhaps the most compelling opportunity for collaboration that positive psychology offers is in the area of character and virtue (Ratchford et al., Chap. 4, this volume). Religious communities have been seeking to understand and cultivate virtues for millennia. Take wisdom, for example. All major world religions claim wisdom is an essential characteristic of a life well-lived, even though they might differ in the particularities of what wisdom entails (Curnow, 2010). In Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, wisdom is viewed as a gift from God and a disposition that is fostered through study and faithful living; however, in other religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, wisdom is tied to spiritual practices that cultivate detachment from the physical world and a self-awareness that leads to harmony with nature (McLaughlin et al., 2017).

Virtue incorporates a focus on not only what is (which traditionally is the orientation and focal point of science) but also on what should be and on who we are to become (McMinn, 2017). Accordingly, any rigorous study of virtue must grapple with matters of teleology—that is, of human fullness, purpose, and calling. To this end, positive psychology needs the help of religious communities. At the same time, religious communities (which represent a key context in which virtue has been cultivated for millennia) can also benefit from the insights and trends uncovered by science, because scientific knowledge can help concretize the tenets of religious thought and practice (McMinn, 2017). For it is one thing to know about a religious principle (e.g., forgiveness) or even that a certain religious principle (e.g., nonattachment, lovingkindness) should be applied to a particular situation. However, it is entirely another matter to show either how the application of this principle can be embodied in real life or what underlying mechanisms and corresponding practices might help cultivate such religious dispositions over time.

To illustrate, in a landmark study, Emmons and McCullough (2003) found evidence of an upward spiral whereby gratitude cultivates prosocial behavior and social connectedness, and in turn these social networks build a sense of love and belonging. This study also found evidence that gratitude promotes spiritual awareness, broadens emotional and cognitive flexibility, and helps individuals resist stress (see Van Cappellen et al., Chap. 20, this volume). This type of upward spiral is intriguing in part because it brings spiritual experience and psychological experience together. By doing so, the study of virtue transcends self-interest and immediate personal benefit, placing virtues in the context of something deeper and richer than what science might naturally consider on its own (McMinn, 2017). Rather than being competitors, religious and scientific communities can form partnerships that synergistically promote holistic personal well-being and social good. For example, Maton et al. (2013) have highlighted the influence and functions that religious communities play in broader society and made a case for greater collaboration, including leveraging religious gatherings as a potential site for interventions.

## *Promoting Human Flourishing*

Most collaboration described in psychology journals involves intentional efforts to bring psychology into religious communities. Yet it is worth repeating that religious communities have promoted human flourishing on their own for millennia. In recognizing this fact, it may be useful for psychologists to stand back and reflect humbly on the breadth and depth of positive psychology that has been occurring implicitly in religious contexts long before the birth of mainstream and positive psychology. Indeed, effective collaboration sometimes involves humble appreciation between collaboration partners before moving into productive work together. We illustrate this by considering examples from Christian and Buddhist spirituality.

Speaking from an ecumenical Christian perspective (i.e., incorporating various Christian religious traditions such as Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, mainline Protestant, and Evangelical), Porter et al. (2019) identified three dimensions of growth and development that are modally cultivated by Christian spirituality: spiritual formation (growth in an individual's relatedness with God or another sacred being), character formation (development of habituated, virtuous dispositions such as kindness, generosity, compassion, and love), and moral formation (outward behavioral manifestations of virtue; e.g., forgiveness, service, and love of one's enemies). Each of these dimensions of formation is understood as an interrelated facet of a larger process that is referred to as Christian formation proper (Collicutt, 2014)—the process whereby Christian adherents are continually formed into the likeness of Jesus (in character, deeds, etc.).

Christian formation, regardless of whether it involves religious leaders or congregants, is understood to take place within the context of community, because relationships are essential for spiritual maturity (Porter et al., 2019). This is true whether it involves relationships within congregations, parishes, seminary communities, or more informal networks of intimate friends. Speaking of the latter, a spiritual classic written in the twelfth century by English monk Aelred of Rievaulx presents a discussion on the topic of spiritual friendships (Aelred of Rievaulx, 2010). In more recent history, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1954) added nuance to this conversation on formation and community by highlighting the paradoxical nature of formation, considering how it requires the Christian to maintain a harmony between spirituality cultivated in community and spirituality cultivated in isolation. He explained: "One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and the one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation and despair" (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 78).

Buddhist spirituality, although also emphasizing teachings such as the impermanence of all conditions and the illusory nature of life and the senses, is nonetheless similarly oriented toward shaping and transforming how people feel and live in the world. The Five Precepts, for example, are somewhat analogous to the second half of the Ten Commandments in Judaism and Christianity, outlining behaviors to avoid such as killing, stealing, and lying; the principle of not killing (which is sometimes

translated as “not harming”) has informed historical and contemporary expressions of nonviolent protest (High Commissioner’s Dialogue Distribution, 2012). Moreover, virtues and emotions such as gratitude, serene joy, and pious confidence are among many emphasized in sacred texts such as the Theravāda *vamsas* (Berkwitz, 2003). In fact, although mindfulness has become somewhat of a buzzword in Western mental health, its origins as a religious contemplative practice were closely tied to the cultivation of lucid awareness (of self, objects, and the Buddha himself; see Segall & Kristeller, Chap. 14, this volume) and were understood as a means of enacting lovingkindness to all beings (Oman, 2015). The cultivation of lovingkindness, among other virtues, involved a relational process that incorporated fellow Buddhists—relying on others for help and observing others model the provision of lovingkindness (Phillips et al., 2012). The visitation of sacred Buddhist heritage sites, for example, represents a salient communal means by which positive outcomes are cultivated. One qualitative study reported how heritage site visitors experienced the emotions of happiness, eudaimonic well-being, and awe, in response to interaction with both the sacred natural and built environment, other Buddhist visitors, and the local religious staff (Huang et al., 2019).

## Empirical Research on Collaboration

Although an exhaustive review of research on collaboration between psychological and religious communities is beyond the scope of this chapter, we highlight illustrative empirical research that has considered clergy as first responders, the positive impact of engagement in religious communities, and positive psychology interventions in religious communities.

### *Clergy as First Responders*

Much of the early research on the intersection of psychological and religious communities focused on the role of clergy as first responders in mental health crisis situations, especially as it pertains to highly religious individuals who may be more comfortable working with members of their own faith tradition or may be concerned their faith will not be adequately integrated or respected in the process of traditional counseling (VanderWaal et al., 2012). In support of this work, Milstein et al. (2010) developed a prevention-based model of Clergy Outreach and Professional Engagement (COPE) to delineate boundaries between clinical care provided by mental health professionals and religious care provided by clergy and to describe pathways of collaboration across these boundaries. This model has demonstrated effectiveness over time and across religious traditions (Ali et al., 2005; Milstein et al., 2017). It offers a promising guide for collaboration between positive psychology and religious communities.

However, the varied and complex psychological needs of parishioners can present challenges to clergy members, who may be overburdened by other clerical responsibilities and who may also lack specialized training to work with the many mental health concerns of their congregants (Uher et al., 2017). With respect to access and care, clergy occupy an important and unique position within their communities in that they are known and trusted, usually offer free services, and may frame problems in spiritual terms that are more congruent with their congregants' worldview (Bohnert et al., 2010). Nonetheless, there is evidence suggesting that ministers are in fact interested both in consulting with mental health professionals about issues of congregational care (Lish et al., 2003) and in referring community members to mental health professionals if a mental health or substance abuse disorder is present (VanderWaal et al., 2012). Indeed, collaboration between clergy and the mental health community can help unlock greater access to mental health resources, particularly in under-resourced areas of the world. For instance, in the poor yet highly religious country of Haiti, Wang et al. (2016) found that children treated by clergy who were trained in spiritually oriented trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy evidenced comparable outcomes to children treated by a professional counselor.

### *Positive Impact of Engagement in Religious Communities*

In addition to their clergy or other religious leaders, religious people also often turn to their broader religious communities for support and care. For example, Tan's (2016) work on lay counseling among Christians presents a comprehensive synthesis of the research and best practices in this area, and this resource can be helpful for both Christian clergy and clinicians alike (Wang, 2017). Religious communities are known for providing rich instrumental social support (whereby individuals obtain practical assistance dealing with problems they are facing) and emotion-focused social support (whereby relational needs for connection and intimacy are met; Aldwin, 2007). Although conventional forms of social support like these are typically available within religious communities, some studies suggest that a distinct dimension of spiritual support may be present as well. Even after controlling for conventional social support, God support, and spiritual leader support, one study reported that Jewish religious community support remained significantly related to greater satisfaction with life and perceived physical health (Lazar & Bjorck, 2008). Similarly, among Christians in India, support received from fellow adherents was predictive of improved emotional functioning, even after controlling for general social support (Torrecillas et al., 2020).

The seeking and provision of support and care within religious communities is a phenomenon observed across all major religions, including Buddhism (Phillips et al., 2012), Christianity (Salloum & Lewis, 2010), Hinduism (Kent et al., 2020), Islam (Torrecillas et al., 2020), and Judaism (Lazar & Bjorck, 2008). Indeed, a growing empirical base highlights the positive impact such support can provide.



One study, for example, found that among a sample of predominantly Hindu South Asians living in the United States, the giving and receiving of congregational emotional support was associated with improved health outcomes (Kent et al., 2020). In another study of adolescent Tibetan Buddhists, social support mediated (explained) the relationship between religious experience and subjective well-being (Ju et al., 2018).

Empirical studies seem to suggest that it is religious service attendance—rather than more intrinsically oriented or privately practiced religiousness/spirituality (e.g., prayer frequency, spiritual or religious identity, or religious coping)—that is most strongly associated with health (VanderWeele et al., 2017; see Long & VanderWeele, Chap. 25, this volume). In fact, some longitudinal evidence indicates that religious service attendance may be a stronger predictor of health and longevity than any other social support variables, including marital status, number of close relatives, number of close friends, and hours spent in social groups (Li et al., 2016). Similarly, both cross-sectional and longitudinal data have indicated associations between religious attendance and lower frequencies of hypertension, functional disability, and overall mortality (Koenig et al., 2001). VanderWeele (2017) outlines several potential mechanisms of change that underscore the communal element of religion as central to religion's positive effects on health and well-being—mechanisms that include meaning in life, optimism, and forgiveness.

Beyond indicators of physical health, engagement in religious communities has also been associated with a variety of positive outcomes that are relevant to psychological well-being. Aside from social support, researchers suggest that another key pathway to emotional health that is inherent in religious communities is those communities' enhancement of members' general emotional coping skills (Idler et al., 2003). Accordingly, scholars have sought to advance understanding and psychometrically validate measures of religious coping that are adapted and contextualized for specific religious traditions, including Buddhism (Phillips et al., 2012), Hinduism (Tarakeshwar et al., 2003), and Islam (Abu Raiya et al., 2011). In addition, empirical evidence suggests that the impact of this enhanced capacity to cope is observable across religious contexts (VanderWeele, 2017; VanderWeele et al., 2017).

### ***Positive Psychology Interventions in Religious Communities***

Early positive psychology research within the context of religious communities was largely restricted to cross-sectional, nonexperimental studies that examined broad trends between religious/spiritual constructs and various positive outcomes related to physical and mental well-being. Although these studies helped establish this line of research, over the past decade, new studies have emerged—often using quasi-experimental designs—that seek to evaluate the effectiveness of religiously integrated positive psychology interventions deployed within religious communities.



Several of these studies are presented in this section, because they represent a welcome evolution by elucidating potential mechanisms of change inherent in religious communities. They also uncover potential means by which religious communities can more effectively cultivate positive outcomes within their members (McMinn, 2017).

Many of the positive psychology interventions evaluated have been designed to cultivate character and virtue dispositions among adherents of specific religious traditions. Thus far, the results have been promising. For example, McLaughlin et al. (2017) developed a wisdom intervention designed to enhance participants' abilities in cognitive, affective, and moral domains. This intervention drew widely from the Christian tradition and incorporated elements that were educational, experiential, and process-oriented, such that proper attention was paid to cultivate both "practical and numinous aspects of wisdom" (p. 4). Two groups of church leaders from Quaker congregations completed the intervention, and significant positive effects were observed. Quantitative analysis indicated significant increases in practical wisdom, postformal thinking (i.e., the ability to consider nuance and complexity), and subjective well-being. Qualitative analysis highlighted themes relating to the relational nature of learning wisdom and to a self-reflective pursuit of greater harmony between what one knows and how one lives (McLaughlin et al., 2017). Similarly, Bufford et al. (2018) reported findings from two grace intervention studies conducted in Christian congregations; they found significant increases in grace and trait self-forgiveness. Likewise, Griffin et al. (2019) conducted a 2-week, community-based forgiveness intervention and observed significant increases in forgiveness over time.

Other positive psychology intervention studies conducted in religious communities have evidenced mixed results, such as observing change that was positive but was statistically indistinguishable from that evidenced by comparison groups. To illustrate, Al-Seheel and Noor (2016) deployed an Islamic-based gratitude intervention and evaluated its effectiveness in cultivating happiness among Muslim students. Drawing from Islamic teaching on gratitude, their gratitude intervention incorporated expressions of gratitude and counting one's blessings, linking such gratitude explicitly to the providence of Allah. Results indicated that participants who practiced this religiously integrated, Islamic, gratitude intervention indeed evidenced significant increases in happiness, but these increases were empirically indistinguishable from the increases evidenced by those who practiced a similar nonreligious gratitude intervention. Likewise, Uher et al. (2017) found a significant positive effect (on psychological well-being, spiritual well-being, life satisfaction, and favorable views of psychology and of interdisciplinary collaboration) from their gratitude intervention in a Christian church; however, again, this positive effect was statistically indistinguishable from what the waitlist comparison group evidenced.

## Implications for Ongoing Research

McMinn et al. (2003) have helpfully distinguished between basic collaboration (which is a minimal competence for all psychologists) and advanced collaboration, which incorporates the pursuit of common values and goals, mutual trust, complementary expertise, and awareness of spirituality. The aforementioned work developing and evaluating positive psychology interventions deployed in religious communities represents a significant step toward advanced collaboration. However, the majority of intervention research thus far has been conducted in the context of a single-site local congregation (i.e., a field trial). Thus, more sophisticated, multisite effectiveness research is needed in which congregations are assigned to conditions, such that contamination within a congregation and issues related to generalization can be assessed.

Nevertheless, preliminary results from existing work have been promising, and even the studies reporting mixed results (e.g., observing positive effects in intervention groups that are indistinguishable from effects in comparison groups) introduce important gaps in scientific knowledge that future researchers should investigate. For example, what are the underlying ingredients of change (that facilitate positive psychology outcomes) that might be shared and/or unique to religious communities, compared to other social networks? Relatedly, what is the unique or additive benefit of explicitly incorporating sacred elements into positive psychology interventions (e.g., a general gratitude intervention vs. a gratitude to God intervention)?

Concerning the development of future positive psychology interventions, special attention should be placed on not only the design of the intervention but also on the process by which these interventions are developed in collaboration with religious communities. Once sufficient data is available in this regard, researchers can begin to synthesize this information and articulate best practices on how interested parties (e.g., those interested in working with institutions of religious education with youth or adults) can develop interventions or curricula of their own in a data-informed manner. Furthermore, some initial evidence suggests that outcomes related to spiritual development and/or character and virtue development may in fact take many years to cultivate, rendering observable change difficult for short-term interventions that have timepoints separated by 6 months or less (Hall et al., 2015). Future research on such interventions should therefore explore developmental changes across longer periods of time.

## Conclusion

Positive psychology offers compelling opportunities to cultivate and demonstrate the benefits of greater collaboration between scientific and religious communities. In this chapter, we have highlighted shared values and work between these communities while surveying the promising conceptual and empirical literature that

attest to the potential benefits this partnership might bear for communities that may not otherwise have access to such resources and support. Indeed, in the wake of unprecedented human suffering (natural disasters, global pandemics, economic injustice, social, political, and racial unrest, and so on), our global communities are in urgent need of renewal of all forms—biological, social, political, moral, and spiritual (Wang, 2021). The sheer scale and scope of the challenges that lie before us far surpass the capacity of any single community or field of study. We cannot think of two better communities to come together to tackle these problems in collaboration with each other than positive psychology and religious communities. Doing so would bring together the fruits of robust scientific methodology and research alongside centuries of tradition, insight, and embodied exemplars of what constitutes a life well-lived (McMinn, 2017; VanderWeele, 2017).

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