Chapter 20
Unique Contributions of Religion to Meaning

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Despite global trends toward secularization (Epstein 2009; Taylor 2007), religion remains a common and potent way for people to find meaning in life. A 2001 Gallup poll of members of churches, synagogues, and other faith communities found that 63 % of respondents strongly agreed with the statement "Because of my faith, I have meaning and purpose in my life" (Winseman 2002). In a more recent survey of people in 84 countries, those with a religious affiliation were more likely to say that their lives have meaning and purpose (92 %) than those without a religious affiliation (83 %; Crabtree and Pelham 2008). These results should not come as a surprise given the search for meaning is one of the most defining characteristics of almost all religions (Livingston 2008) and the provision of meaning has long been identified as a key function of religion (Emmons and Paloutzian 2003; Frankl 1977; Geertz 1966; Jonas and Fischer 2006; Schweiker 1969). Indeed, meaning is so integral to religion that religion itself is often identified as a global meaning system, an interpretive lens through which all aspects of life are organized and understood (Park 2005a; Schweiker 1969; Silberman 2005). We therefore do not believe the key question in considering religion and meaning is whether there is an association. There is. More important in understanding the role of religion in meaning is the question of whether religion makes unique contributions to meaning. Does religious meaning look different from nonreligious meaning? Does religion provide meaning-making mechanisms unavailable through other means?

In considering these related questions, we first define what we mean by religion and then review evidence that religious meaning explains variance in meaning-related outcomes that general, nonreligious meaning does not. Taking our cue from Park

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(2005a, 2010), we distinguish between global and situational meaning in this chapter. Global meaning is the template people typically use to make sense of their world while situational meaning derives from day to day experiences and life events. Although the two can and often do agree, meaning-making efforts are necessary when situational meaning does not match with global meaning. Janoff-Bulman (1992) calls this disharmony "shattered assumptions" while others refer to threatened or violated meaning (see Heine et al. 2006). Religion can play a role in both global meaning and the meaning-making processes of situational meaning; we will consider the potentially unique contributions of religion to each. We will then turn our attention to reasons why religious meaning may function differently than general, nonreligious meaning. Finally, we will consider the implications of differences between religious and nonreligious meaning.

To analyze the relation between religion and meaning, it is necessary to consider what is meant by *religion*. This task is difficult because definitions of religion almost unfailingly commit one of two errors – inclusion or exclusion. Definitions with inclusion errors tend to be overly broad. For example, some definitions classify anything with a meaning-making function as religion (Barrett 2001; Lindbeck 1984), perhaps including systems of belief that adherents would adamantly deny are religious at all, such as atheism and secular humanism. Definitions with exclusion errors tend to be specific to a fault. For example, some definitions of religion identify belief in a supernatural creator as integral, ruling out nontheistic faiths that do not meet this criterion, such as Buddhism (Durkheim 1915). Further muddying the waters, it is possible to draw sharp divides between related concepts including religion and spirituality, personal and institutional religion, ethnic and elective religion, and a host of others (see Paloutzian and Park 2005 and Hood et al. 2009). Clearly, religion is multidimensional – not just one thing, but an organization of things. Moreover, the content of religion varies by condition, from situation to situation and individual to individual. This all means that religion is a fuzzy concept (Zinnbauer et al. 1997). Such distinctions are useful tools for conceptualizing a complex phenomenon; however, given the variety of possible definitions of religion, it is important when theorizing to note the working definition (McIntosh and Newton in press). As we are considering the relation to meaning, we try to avoid the tautology of defining religion as a meaning system. Instead, we focus on elements we see as common to a Western basic-level concept of religion: a belief system that typically includes elements of the metaphysical, typically includes a social structure, and to some degree self-identifies as religious or spiritual. The less similar to this conceptualization of religion the phenomenon of interest is, the more likely our analysis will be off the mark.

Evidence of the Uniqueness of Religious Meaning

Religion and Global Meaning

As noted above, the connections of religion to meaning are so pervasive that some view religion itself as a global meaning system and a far-reaching and powerful one at that (Park 2005a; Schweiker 1969; Silberman 2005). This is bolstered by

evidence supporting the ability of religion as a global source of meaning to trump other, situational sources of meaning, such as mood (Hicks and King 2008). But, is religious global meaning distinct from nonreligious global meaning? One way to answer this question is to directly compare individuals with presumably religious or nonreligious sources of global meaning. Pohlmann et al. (2006) found differences between the meaning systems of theology students and science students. Although the two groups identified a similar number of meaning sources, the theology students had more complex and coherent meaning systems than did the science students. Similarly, a comparison of religious and secular kibbutzim in Israel found that religious kibbutz members had a higher sense of coherence in life than their secular counterparts (Kark et al. 1996).

These two studies directly compared groups that presumably derived global meaning from either a religious or a nonreligious source. Because these groups were naturally occurring, there are several interpretations for the observed differences, however. One is the possibility that religion creates more coherent and complex systems of meaning than do other sources of meaning. Due to self-selection into these groups, a second possibility is that individuals with different meaning system characteristics (or different needs for meaning) choose affiliation with different groups. Those who have, or need, more complex and coherent meaning systems may be differentially attracted to the study of theology versus science or to life in a religious community versus a secular one. This second possibility is consistent with the idea that religious meaning differs from nonreligious meaning but does not make the assumption that religion plays a causal role in the development of different meaning system characteristics. Finally, a third possibility is that group differences other than the overt presence of religion may be responsible for the observed differences. For example, scholarship in the humanities might encourage ways of thinking and expression that register as more coherence and complexity in meaning than the ways of thinking and expression encouraged by scholarship in the sciences.

The first two explanations for these findings are both consistent with the idea that religious meaning differs from nonreligious meaning, but they disagree about whether religion itself influences meaning or merely reflects different meaning processes, goals, or outcomes. The third possibility suggests that differences found between religious and nonreligious meaning are artifacts and that religion is not unique (perhaps the study of Victorian novels produces a similar sense of coherence) but just another source of a broadly applicable meaning system. Any other broad meaning system could be expected to look the same as religious meaning and to have the same effects.

To narrow these possibilities and to avoid the uncertainties of evaluating the uniqueness of religion in naturally occurring groups, we have used randomized experiments to determine whether religious global meaning is distinct from nonreligious global meaning. To do so, we needed to find a truly global nonreligious meaning system. Because of the broad applicability of religious meaning to almost every aspect of life, however, it is difficult to find a nonreligious global meaning system as comprehensive as religious meaning to use as a comparison condition (see Hood et al. 2005). For example, feminism is a meaning system that can inform many aspects of a person's life, but it is unlikely to have quite the reach of religious

meaning. For this reason, when assessing what religion brings to global meaning, it is important to level the playing field with a meaning system that can be either religious or nonreligious. Humanitarianism as a meaning system, for example, can either be religious or secular (see Day 1952, and Russell 1925). If exposure to religious humanitarianism has effects on outcomes that exposure to nonreligious humanitarianism does not, it would indicate that something about religion is adding something to that particular meaning system. Although past research has compared moral and nonmoral versions of meaning systems (e.g., moral vegetarianism vs. health vegetarianism; Rozin et al. 1997), comparisons of religious and nonreligious versions of meaning systems have only recently been undertaken (Newton and McIntosh 2009a, 2013).

In two randomized experiments, we evaluated whether religious humanitarianism has a greater influence than nonreligious humanitarianism on the prosocial outcomes encouraged by humanitarian meaning systems (Fong 2007; Shen and Edwards 2005). Using website content to prime either a religious humanitarianism meaning system or a nonreligious humanitarianism meaning system, we found that exposure to religious humanitarianism resulted in greater preference for a product using prosocial advertising (i.e., a cookie made with fair trade ingredients) than a product using competence advertising (i.e., a cookie made with quality ingredients). Those exposed to the religious humanitarianism prime were also willing to spend more money on the prosocial product than those exposed to the nonreligious humanitarianism prime (Newton and McIntosh 2009a). These differences were main effects not mediated by individual differences in religion, perhaps due to the connection between religion and prosociality as part of a cultural-level schema of religion. In another study using the same website-priming technique, we found that exposure to the religious humanitarianism prime resulted in participants donating more money to charity when given the opportunity than exposure to the nonreligious humanitarianism prime, again regardless of individual differences in religion (Newton and McIntosh 2013).

The field evidence suggests that meaning is different – more complex and coherent and resulting in greater subjective sense of coherence – when derived from a religious versus a nonreligious source, providing support for the real-world importance of differences between religious and nonreligious global meaning (Kark et al. 1996; Pohlmann et al. 2006). The experimental evidence suggests that observed differences are not solely due to self-selection (though the data do not exclude self-selection as one factor contributing to observed differences in the field) or to artifactual influences. Further research documenting other differences between individuals in religious versus nonreligious groups would help clarify the reasons and nature of the differences between religious and nonreligious meaning. For example, do individual differences in need for meaning or in the occurrence of events that stimulate meaning-seeking predict choices to join different groups? Descriptions of social processes within groups that may influence the development of more coherent and complex meaning systems (see Ladd and McIntosh 2008) would also be useful to identify the mechanisms by which group membership can influence global meaning. Further, continued use of experimental methods should help to identify the

active ingredients of different types of global meaning systems and point to possible reasons for observed differences. In our view, the research to date clearly supports the importance and likely benefit of such investigations.

Religion and Meaning-Making

Religion's role as a global meaning system extends to the situational meaning constructed daily and thereby also guides meaning-making processes (Park 2005a). One frequently noted example of the relationship between religion and meaning-making is the influence of religion on the appraised meaning of stressors (Pargament 1997). For example, both religious importance and participation predict parents finding greater meaning after the sudden death of their child (McIntosh et al. 1993). Further, specific religious beliefs also predict understandings of stressful events. We have found that among parents of children with disabilities, general religiousness, positive God image, and a spiritual, deity-centered approach to religion were all associated with more positive appraisals of their child's disability, including thinking of the disability as a challenge rather than a threat (Newton and McIntosh 2010). Similarly, religion variables were also related to more appraisals of stressors associated with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita as beneficial by displaced Jewish college students along the Gulf Coast (Newton and McIntosh 2009b). Evidence also indicates that the influence of religion on appraisals explains unique variance in outcomes, offering further support for the unique role of religion in meaning making. One study found that religious appraisals (e.g., thinking of death as a benevolent act of God) were significant predictors of finding meaning in life among hospice caregivers, even after controlling for nonreligious appraisals (e.g., thinking of death as an opportunity for growth; Mickley et al. 1998).

Meaning-making coping is another process closely tied to religion (Pargament 1997). Religious coping strategies meant to increase meaning (e.g., "I tried to find the lesson from God in the event") have been shown to influence the outcomes of those coping with chronic pain (Bush et al. 1999), divorce (Webb et al. 2010), breast cancer (Gall et al. 2009; Thuné-Boyle et al. 2011), the death of a loved one (Park 2005b; Wortmann and Park 2009), and many other stressful situations to largely positive result. Further, religion may become even more important for meaning-making coping as the severity of the stressor increases. In an analysis of focus groups of cancer survivors and seriously ill nursing home residents, Ardelt et al. (2008) found the importance of religion for meaning-making coping increased as the seriousness of the illness increased. Supporting religion's unique role in meaning making coping, one study found that religious meaning-making coping strategies had effects on outcomes of kidney patients that were not mediated by nonreligious meaning mechanisms (e.g., general cognitive structuring; Tix and Frazier 1998).

As suggested by the prevalence and potency of religious meaning-making during times of stress, threats to meaning especially reveal the unique contributions of religion to meaning. When primed with meaninglessness or thoughts of death, participants

reported greater religiousness, suggesting that religious meaning compensates for deficits in general meaning (Norenzayan and Hansen 2006; Van Tongreen and Green 2010). The reverse is also true; when made to think about religion, religious participants found reminders of death and meaninglessness less threatening (Jonas and Fischer 2006). This compensatory pattern indicates that religious meaning can fill gaps that general meaning cannot.

Taken together, the evidence reviewed here suggests that religion differs from other global meaning systems and that religion is especially influential in meaning making processes. While we certainly do not argue that there are no other sources of meaning, we believe the evidence supports the idea that religion is unique in its relation to global meaning and meaning-making processes. Succinctly put, it appears as if religion makes meaning more meaningful. This conclusion raises the question of *why* religious meaning is distinct from general, nonreligious meaning.

Why Religious Meaning Is Unique

There are a number of possible reasons why religion may provide a unique type of global meaning and why it may be uniquely suitable for meaning making in stressful circumstances. We discuss these reasons using four categories – comprehensiveness, sacredness, particular religious beliefs, and social components of religion that encourage meaning. However, note that these reasons need not be mutually exclusive; indeed, one reason for religion's singular status may be that it incorporates some or all of these possibilities in distinctive combinations, whereas other meaning systems and meaning-making processes do not. Thus, our position is not necessarily that religion is unique in each of these respects taken individually (though that may also be true for some or all of them) but that it may be unique in that certain examples of religion contain multiple distinguishing characteristics.

Comprehensiveness

One central function of meaning is making sense of the world at large (Park 2010). Meaning, in this sense, is about making connections and identifying relationships (Baumeister and Vohs 2002; Heine et al. 2006). The more possibilities there are for connections to be made, the more meaning can be found. In other words, comprehensiveness leads to comprehension. To this end, the ability of religion to make meaningful connections is almost without compare (Hood et al. 2005). Religion can inform almost every aspect of an adherent's life, including his or her perceptions, feelings, goals, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (McIntosh 1995; Silberman 2005). Even the Latin origin of the word (religāre, "to tie together," Latin Concise Dictionary, 1st ed. 2003) points to the ability of religion to subsume many aspects of life under one umbrella, from interpersonal relationships, to food choices, to understandings

of physical reality. Further, because the reach of religion extends to metaphysical and existential matters, the comprehensiveness of religion is unique not only in its breadth but also in its content. Indeed, religion may be broad enough to incorporate meanings created or experienced in disparate domains, potentially making it a superordinate source of meaning (see Schweiker 1969). The uncommon breadth of religion, therefore, may lend itself to global meaning systems that are more complex and coherent as well as to more effective meaning-making. Despite its potential importance, however, breadth may not be the only influential difference between religious meaning and nonreligious meaning. Recall that the effects of a broad, nonreligious meaning system (i.e., secular humanitarianism) were weaker than the effects of the religious version of that same broad meaning system (i.e., religious humanitarianism; Newton and McIntosh 2013). Other characteristics of religion, such as the sacred as a point of reference, may offer further insight into why religion makes meaning more meaningful.

Sacredness

Another central function of meaning is providing significance, that is, whatever is worth caring about (Park 2010). What people consider to be significant varies widely, so one way religious meaning may differ from nonreligious meaning is the content of significance. Pargament (1997) defined religion as "a search for significance in ways related to the sacred" (p. 32). He later identified the quality of the sacred as the ultimate unique characteristic of religion (Pargament 2002). Therefore, sacredness may help to account for differences between religious meaning and nonreligious meaning. Baumeister (1991) identified four patterns of motivation underlying any search for significance or quest for meaning in life: purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth. Religious searches for significance may differ from nonreligious searches by imbuing these meaning motivations with the quality of the sacred; we will consider the role of sacredness in each.

Purpose can be understood as having goals for the future and anticipating of a future state of fulfillment (Baumeister and Vohs 2002). In the context of religion, purpose becomes sacred purpose, with uniquely religious goals (e.g., holiness, transcendence, seeking the divine) and uniquely religious future states of fulfillment (e.g., heaven, reincarnation, enlightenment), so perhaps able to uniquely provide meaning. There is empirical support for the unique contributions of sacredness to purpose, particularly in the form of religious goals. In a community sample asked to describe their personal goals, those who reported more religious or sanctified goals (e.g., "deepen my relationship with God") were more likely to report greater subjective well-being and a greater sense of purpose in life compared to those who reported more nonreligious or non-sanctified goals (e.g., "help my friends and let them know that I care"; Emmons et al. 1998). Similarly, another study found that people tended to place higher priority on and invest more resources in sacred goals than nonsacred goals and derived more meaning from these religious goals (Mahoney et al. 2005).

Like sacred purpose, sacred values may help to distinguish between religious and nonreligious meaning. Values inform our sense of right and wrong and provide a basis for our behaviors. Values that are considered sacred could arguably hold even more sway over morality and quests for meaning. For example, having a value that the environment is important and should be protected is enhanced when this value takes on overtones of sacredness (e.g., God created the earth, so it is our duty to take care of it; Tarakewshar et al. 2001). Relatedly, couples who value their marriage and believe that it is sacred experience more marital satisfaction and commitment than couples who valued their marriage but did not believe that it is sacred (Pargament and Mahoney 2005). Sacred values, then, seem to provide more meaning than non-sacred values.

Efficacy, the belief that one can make a difference may also draw particular potency for meaning when it is characterized by the sacred. Divine injunctions to "go forth" and do things (e.g., reproduce, spread the word, live a righteous life) are common in Western religions and may offer an uncommon sense of empowerment to adherents, thereby providing more meaning and significance in life.

Finally, the belief that one is a good person worthy of good things (i.e., self-worth) may also get a boost from sacredness. Beliefs about self-worth abound in Western religions; the belief that one is created in the image of God, the belief that one belongs to a people chosen by God, and the belief that one is redeemed by God are but a few examples. These beliefs can all lend a sacred aspect to beliefs about self-worth (e.g., I am good because God thinks I am good), perhaps making beliefs about self-worth less vulnerable to threat (e.g., it doesn't matter that she doesn't think I am good because God thinks I am good) and more conducive to meaning. In sum, religious searches for significance and meaning, particularly in the domains of purpose, values, efficacy, and self-worth, seem to be enhanced by the uniquely religious quality of the sacred.

Particular Religious Beliefs

All religions have particular beliefs that help to set them apart from secular institutions or groups. Some of these have direct implications for global meaning systems and meaning-making processes. One such belief is in the existence of a divine planner or a universal plan which may go beyond individual understanding. Belief in such a plan or planner may provide a sense that there is meaning, even if one does not understand it. Meaning may be experienced, and sense of coherence preserved, even if the individual cannot himself or herself develop an understanding of the event that can be reconciled with prior understandings of the world. A belief system that does not have an agent with a plan (even an unknowable plan) means that if the individual cannot find meaning, then the individual may be left with the conclusion that there is no meaning. A metaphysical plan or planner allows for the conclusion "I don't know the meaning" to be dissociated more easily from "there is no meaning." Note that this belief does not require a theistic religion.

   Another particular religious belief with implications for meaning is the belief in
a literal afterlife. An explanation for an event or the ability to see purpose or meaning
stemming from an event may be enhanced if the time horizon for the realization of
that meaning is extended infinitely. One may not be able to see any purpose in the
near term, but it may be plausible that a purpose will become evident if one believes
life will continue. More dramatically, if a belief in a literal afterlife is combined
with a belief that rewards and punishments will occur in such an afterlife, then pur-
pose in negative events may be easily seen. Furthermore, belief in a literal afterlife
enables people to feel significant and eternal, contributing to a subjective sense of
meaning in life and potentially effectively warding off existential terror (Jonas and
Fischer 2006).

Social Components

As noted in our working definition, religion typically includes a social structure
(which may or may not be an institution). Components of this social structure may
contribute to the uniqueness of religious meaning. As an example of the importance
of the social component beyond other aspects of religion, note that among bereaved
parents, religious participation predicted finding meaning in the loss even when
controlling for importance of religion to the individual (McIntosh et al. 1993). One
reason for this might be the centrality of meaning to the religious social context.
One more or less explicit purpose of religious organization is to grapple with issues
of meaning (Emmons 1999). The immediate social structure of religion provides
interactions and roles that support development, maintenance, and expansion of
meaning. Participation in such an organization will increase the likelihood that one
will actively develop and apply a meaning system and also that one will have social
resources to support or suggest meaning when meaning is challenged; other groups
may provide some meaning, but the breadth and focus on meaning is likely to be
much higher in religious organizations (cf. Ladd and McIntosh 2008). Participation
in a religious social network may provide both informational (e.g., this is why such
an event would happen) and normative (e.g., this is how one should think about this
event) social influence (Deutsch and Gerard 1955) that may facilitate development
of meaning. Members of a person's religious community may support beliefs and
provide consonant cognitions that bolster the cognitive stability and influence of the
beliefs (Festinger 1957; Festinger et al. 1956). Further, participation in the social
aspect of religion may increase certain individual behaviors, such as prayer or medi-
tation, which in turn may facilitate development and maintenance of meaning.
   The social component of religion may expand beyond other social sources of
meaning not only because meaning is explicit and foundational to religious groups
but also because religion is typically more than just an immediate social group. As
both a cultural idea and an organization, religion often extends back generations.
Moreover, it often explicitly notes this temporal continuity and refers to individuals
and events in the past that are important and that exemplify meaning. Separate from

any reality of consistency of beliefs or meaning, the messaging of religion supports the individual in thinking that the understandings he or she has are well supported, stable, and coherent.

Conclusion

Religion and meaning share a close relationship. However, religion is not simply meaning and meaning is not simply religion. These two constructs are independently complex, and as suggested by this chapter, examining how religious global meaning systems differ from nonreligious global meaning systems as well as how religious meaning-making differs from nonreligious meaning-making can enlighten us about the nature of each. These differences indicate that religion seems to provide a distinct type of global meaning and seems to be uniquely suitable for meaning making in stressful circumstances. Therefore, we contend that the study of religion is necessary to fully understand meaning and vice versa. However, neither meaning nor religion should be reduced to the other. Religion may do what it does in many cases because of its association with meaning, but simply studying meaning would omit part of what is important about religion. Religion may support meaning and meaning-making, but nonreligious versions of these exist, and we believe they will differ in important ways from the religious versions.

To understand the interrelationship of meaning and religion, documenting specific characteristics of religious global meaning that differentiate it from nonreligious global meaning and identifying mechanisms by which religious meaning making differs from nonreligious meaning making will be important next steps. We speculated here about potential features and pathways, but direct empirical tests of these are lacking. We especially recommend experimental designs to isolate the causal active ingredients of religion in the creation of unique global meaning systems and the use of unique meaning-making processes. For example, if one hypothesizes that religion increases the subjective experience of meaning because it encourages belief in a divine plan, the degree of "divine planfulness" could be manipulated with exposure to religious passages that emphasize or deemphasize this characteristic compared to exposure to a control passage. Parsing the individual differences that lead to different types global meaning systems could also help to shed light on the role of religion in meaning. Do some people seek out religion because they need, want, or have more coherent and complex meaning systems? Who is more likely to find religious meaning to be more meaningful? Identifying the situational factors underlying religious versus nonreligious sources of meaning is another fertile line of inquiry. Does exposure to events that stimulate meaning-seeking (e.g., trauma events, the birth of a child, bereavement) predict choices to join different groups with different global meaning systems and meaning making strategies?

The assumption throughout this review has been that religion *enhances* the subjective sense of meaning and leads to more positive meaning-related outcomes. This assumption that religion is generally good for meaning has broad empirical support

(see Park 2005a); however, exceptions to religion's goodness for meaning may not be uncommon. These exceptions could further illuminate the relationship between religion and meaning. Are there circumstances in which a religious global meaning system decreases the subjective sense of meaning compared to a nonreligious global meaning system? For example, the Western belief that God is good and powerful is not easily reconciled with the reality of bad stuff happening to good people. Does this asymmetry lead to a decreased sense of meaning and worse meaning-related outcomes?

It also may be true that a meaning approach can help us to understand variation in religion. For example, aspects of religion that are hard to understand at face value (e.g., belief in a vindictive God, refusing blood transfusions, wearing restrictive garments) make more sense if embedded in a meaning system perspective. The powerful need for meaning could then help us to understand the forms and functions of religion just as considerations of religion can help us to more fully understand the processes and effects of meaning.

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