

Cindy Miller-Perrin  
Elizabeth Krumrei Mancuso

# Faith from a Positive Psychology Perspective

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## Author Biography

**Cindy Miller-Perrin** earned her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Washington State University and is Distinguished Professor of Psychology at Pepperdine University. She enjoys teaching Child Clinical Psychology, Positive Psychology, Advanced Research Seminar (Psychology Honors Program), and Introductory Psychology. She also enjoys researching with undergraduates and is the recipient of the 2008 Howard A. White Award for Teaching Excellence. Dr. Miller-Perrin has authored numerous journal articles and book chapters covering a range of topics, including child maltreatment, family violence, vocation and life purpose, and faith development in college students. She has co-authored three books, including *Family Violence Across the Lifespan* (with O. Barnett & R. Perrin, Sage 1997, 2005, 2011), *Child Maltreatment* (with R. Perrin, Sage 1999, 2007, 2013), and *Child Sexual Abuse: Sharing the Responsibility* (with S. Wurtele, University of Nebraska Press, 1992). She is an APA Fellow in the American Psychological Association and has served with APA as the President of the Section on Child Maltreatment and Member-At-Large for Advocacy for Division 37 Society for Child and Family Policy and Practice. She is currently President-Elect of APA's Division 37.

**Elizabeth Krumrei Mancuso** earned an M.A. in Religion and Counseling from Pepperdine University in 2004 and a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Bowling Green State University in 2009. She joined the faculty at Pepperdine University's Seaver College in 2009, where she is now Associate Professor of Psychology and teaches courses in psychotherapy, family therapy, basic and advanced research methodology, and psychology of religion. She has published journal articles on topics such as religious coping, spiritual struggles, gratitude, forgiveness, divorce, and college student mental health. She has also authored book chapters on spirituality in psychotherapy, religious coping, and spiritual struggles. Dr. Krumrei Mancuso has received grants and fellowships for research on the topics of religious coping, spiritual struggles, spiritual movement meditation, community-based

research, prostitution, and intellectual humility. She has also received grants for supervising undergraduate research and for teaching courses in the areas of Judaism and service learning. She has enjoyed mentoring students and conducting clinical work. She has provided psychotherapy at a children's resource center, a community mental health center, and college counseling centers.

# Chapter 1

## Religion, Spirituality, and Positive Psychology: History and Definitions

The significance of religion within society has a long history that has withstood the test of time. Although the great social thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries predicted the eventual decline of religion through what is now known as secularization theory – a theory that predicts the demise of religion as societies become more modern and industrialized – recent views reflect growing criticism of traditional secularization theory and suggest that the world is just as religious as it ever has been (Berger, 1999; Norris & Inglehart, 2011; Stark & Finke, 2000). Despite the critiques of religion by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and others, religion – in some form – is a pervasive phenomenon both within and outside the United States. Dawkins (2008), in his famously titled book *The God Delusion*, suggests that religious faith is a non-reality based on a false sense of belief in a Higher Power that has biologically evolved. Nevertheless, practically, religion and spirituality are a reality for millions across the globe. As sociology's well-known Thomas Theorem stipulates, situations defined as real are in fact real in their consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). Regardless of ontology, religious beliefs have very real consequences in people's lives.

Determining the precise number of individuals who claim some degree of religiosity and/or spirituality, however, is no easy task. A great deal of research has examined the role of religion and spirituality for Americans living in the United States. Such research has been criticized for various methodological reasons. There is little official data, for example, that is available because the U.S. Census Bureau does not collect such information. Numerous nongovernmental surveys, although flawed, have provided fairly consistent findings. One of the most frequently cited sources of information on religious behavior and beliefs in the United States is the General Social Survey (GSS), conducted nationally by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) annually or biannually since 1972. According to the 2010 GSS, 71 % of the U.S. population attends religious services with some frequency with approximately 31 % attending nearly every week or more (Smith, Marsden, & Hout, 2011). In terms of religious beliefs, the most recent American Religious Identification Survey found that when a 2008 nationally representative

sample was asked about the existence of God, 70 % of Americans responded “There is definitely a personal God” (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). Most such surveys also reveal that the majority of Americans pray at least once a day and endorse religion as a very important part of their lives (e.g., Smith et al., 2011; Pew Research Center, 2008). In his recent book entitled, *God is Alive and Well*, Frank Newport (2012) described findings from the Gallup Daily tracking project which involved more than 350,000 interviews with randomly selected Americans per year since 2008. When Americans were asked the question, “Do you believe in God?” in 2011, approximately 90 % responded affirmatively, a figure only slightly lower than the 96 % of Americans responding affirmatively in a Gallup sample in 1944 (Newport, 2012). Newport also reported on various other indicators of religiosity such as attendance at religious services, a belief that religion can answer all or most of today’s problems, and the degree to which religion is an important part of their daily lives, with approximately 40–60 % of Americans responding affirmatively.

The large majority of Americans, then, profess some form of religious faith as measured in a variety of ways. With which religious identity do the majority of Americans identify? The data suggest that America is a Christian nation. According to both GSS and Gallup data, the overwhelming majority of all Americans are classified as either Catholics or Protestants (Newport, 2012; Smith et al., 2011). Stated another way, since 16 % of Americans claim no religious identity, of those Americans who identify as religious, approximately 95 % are Christian (Newport, 2012).

As these data suggest, the majority of Americans define themselves as Christians. However, the percentage of the U.S. population identifying with other religious and spiritual traditions, including native-born Americans and new Americans or members of immigrant communities, is increasing (Smith, 2002). Increases were noted between 1990 and 2000 in the percentage of the population identifying as New Age (240 %), Hindu (237 %), Buddhist (170 %), and Muslim (109 %) (Barrett, Kurian, & Johnson, 2001). More recent data from the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life suggests that these trends are continuing (Pew Research Center, 2008). Muslims, for example, accounted for roughly 0.6 % of the U.S. adult population in 2007 and Hindus accounted for approximately 0.4 % of the population. In addition, while the number of individuals who identify with no particular religious affiliation (i.e., “religious nones”) is increasing other measures of religiosity and spirituality, such as the importance of religion in their lives, have remained stable (e.g., Newport, 2012). In addition, the number who identify as “spiritual not religious” is also increasing (Newport, 2012; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). These findings suggest that researchers and practitioners need to be aware of the increasing religious diversity within America, as well as the distinctions that the public are making between religiosity and spirituality.

There is also evidence that religiosity and spirituality are alive and well, not just in the U.S., but globally. According to the International Social Survey (Smith, 2012), for example, cross-national indices also suggest significant numbers of people expressing a belief in God, although rates vary across countries. Examining 30 countries that were surveyed during 2 of 3 years (1991, 1998, or 2008), Smith

found that the majority of individuals in several non U.S. countries endorsed a belief in God when presented with the following statement: “I know God really exists and have no doubts about it.” Compared to 61 % of U.S. respondents, the majority of respondents from the Philippines (84 %), Chile (79 %), Israel (66 %), Poland (62 %), Cyprus (59 %), and Portugal (51 %) also endorsed this statement. Respondents were also asked whether they believe in a personal God “who concerns himself with every human being personally.” For 37 % of countries surveyed, the majority of respondents endorsed this item. Compared to 68 % of U.S. respondents, the majority of respondents from the following countries also endorsed this item: Philippines (92 %), Chile (72 %), Israel (67 %), Ireland (64 %), Poland (60 %), Northern Ireland (60 %), Portugal (58 %), Cyprus (56 %), Italy (54 %), and Slovakia (51 %).

The impact of this worldwide adherence to religious faith is evident across multiple societal levels and systems from the macro level (e.g., including social and cultural practices, politics, and economics) to the micro level (e.g., including communities and institutions and relationships among individuals and within families) to the individual level. At the macro level, the influence of religion may be most obvious in various cultural practices. For example, there has been a long tradition in both the United States and the United Kingdom that witnesses in court swear on the Bible to profess the truth before testifying. Many national holidays within the U.S. are tied to religious observances such as Christmas and Easter. Furthermore, in 1956 the words “In God We Trust,” which is stamped on U.S. coins and paper currency, became the national motto of the U.S. and was recently reaffirmed as such in 2011 (Wing, 2013).

Religion has also become a significant sociocultural force in both domestic and international politics. In the U.S., national election news coverage has frequently focused attention on the religious affiliations of the candidates from Kennedy’s Catholicism in 1960 to Obama’s connection with the controversial church pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ in 2008 to Romney’s Mormonism in 2012. In addition, recent surveys highlight the important role of religion in partisan support and electoral behavior. Indeed, surveys of U.S. citizens have repeatedly shown that those who attend church most frequently are most likely to vote for Republican candidates while those who seldom or never attend church tend to vote for Democratic candidates (Newport, 2012; Norris, 2000). Broader research examining international voting trends tends to support this finding. In an examination of the Values Surveys from 1981 to 2001, representative national surveys carried out in 80 different countries, Norris and Inglehart (2011) found that religion was the strongest predictor of voting behavior, above and beyond alternative indicators such as education, social class, income, age, and sex. Similar to the findings of U.S. surveys, those who reported attending religious services most frequently were more likely to vote for parties on the right while those who reported attending religious services least frequently were more likely to vote for parties on the left. In most countries, the religious right has been associated with espousing conservative politics such as the U.S. Republican’s stance on the issues of abortion and gay marriage; however, in some countries such as Latin America, religion has been

associated with more liberal movements (Jelen & Wilcox, 2002; Wilcox, 1992). In addition, some research suggests that religious participation is negatively associated with political right affiliation, particularly in agrarian societies (Norris & Inglehart, 2011). Therefore, although religion does appear to impact politics, the nature of this relationship is complex and not always consistent.

Religion and spirituality are not only influential at the macro level but also at the micro and individual levels. Micro level systems include intimate relationships between parents and children, friends, and romantic partners, as well as families and communities. Religion and spirituality can impact the values and beliefs associated with various unions such as the circumstances under which one can legally marry or divorce or the circumstances surrounding conception and abortion. Religion and spirituality can also impact micro level systems on an interpersonal level and new research evidence has examined the various ways that religion and spirituality impact circumstances of various relationships such as marital conflict, perceived spousal support, parenting styles, and relationships between adolescents and their parents (e.g., Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994; Mahoney et al., 1999). The influence of religion at the individual level is evidenced in recent research findings suggesting that religion and spirituality impact health, both physical and emotional (Koenig, 1998; Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Newport, 2012; Pargament, 2013).

That religion and spirituality have an impact on these various social systems, from the macro level to the micro level to the individual level, is undeniable. What is less clear is the precise nature of its impact. Is religion helpful or harmful? Does it propagate good or evil? Anecdotally, examples of both types of outcomes abound. The tragic events of 9/11 were most certainly motivated in part by religious beliefs. Honor killings – which have occurred in many countries across the world – primarily impact women who were murdered because their perpetrators viewed their actions as a violation of rules of religious conduct such as dressing in a manner unacceptable to the family or community, desiring to marry by one's own choice, or engaging in sexual acts outside marriage (e.g., Chesler, 2009; United Nations, 2002). Religion and the rise of religious extremists have often played an arguably negative role in the political conflicts of the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, and Northern Ireland. In the Middle East, individuals are stoned to death for violating religious customs. The Crusades, where millions died, were justified through religious beliefs. But religious beliefs have also played a role in what are viewed as positive outcomes. Most experts believe that religion played a central and critical role in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (Schultz & Harvey, 2010). Throughout history, churches have also been a source of a variety of prosocial opportunities such as volunteerism and services such as counseling, education, and financial support (Billingsley, 1999; Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). But the impact of religion is not always clear-cut as in the role that religion played with regard to the issue of slavery in the U.S. Biblical scripture, for example, was at the same time used to argue both for and against slavery, as have other religious teachings for other social issues such as the unequal treatment of women and homosexuals (e.g., Moghadam, 1999; Schultz & Harvey, 2010).

Although the valence of the impact of religion is not solely positive or negative, what is clear is that religion and spirituality are both pervasive and significant in their impact. Despite the fact that religion and spirituality have been studied by philosophers, sociologists, and political scientists for a long time, the primary focus of investigation has centered on a macro level of analysis. The topic of religion and spirituality at the micro and individual levels has received far less attention until relatively recently. This reality is due no doubt, in part, to the historically contentious relationship between science and religion, in general, and between the field of psychology and religion, in particular. These tensions have begun to dissipate in recent years and over the past 15 years or so there has been a virtual explosion of research aimed at determining the precise effects of religion and spirituality on human functioning and interaction. A review of the history of the relationship between religion, science, and the field of psychology, and the subfield of positive psychology in particular, will provide a context helpful to understanding the study of why faith matters to individual human functioning and human interpersonal interaction, the focus of this book.

## **1.1 A History of the Relationship Between Religion and Science**

Although religion appears to play a prominent role in the lives of the lay public, this is less true among scientists and academicians. Indeed, the relationship between science and religion has a controversial history. Since the positivist era, these two areas have been largely viewed as incompatible. The controversy is essentially that religious knowledge and practice is based on belief and faith in the supernatural, while scientific knowledge is based on empirical observation and rigorous testing of hypotheses (Turbott, 2004). Others have suggested further that the function of science is to test hypotheses about events in the natural world while the function of religion is to address questions of meaning and ultimate purpose and causality (Brown, 2012). As a result of this dichotomy, the scientific community has viewed science and religion as separate and unrelated entities. Indeed, in 1981 the U.S. National Academy of Sciences stated its policy on the topic as follows: “Religion and science are separate and mutually exclusive realms of human thought whose presentation in the same context leads to misunderstanding of both scientific theory and religious belief” (U.S. National Academy of Sciences, 1984, p. 6).

Given the historical divide between science and religion, it is perhaps not surprising that the personal beliefs and values of scientists are largely antagonistic toward religion. Many studies have examined the religious beliefs of scientists in the United States, for example, and generally find that scientists are less likely than the general public to believe in God. In an oft cited survey study conducted by Larson and Witham in 1997, the researchers present the results of a replication of 1913 and 1933 surveys by James H. Leuba (Larson & Witham, 1998). In those



surveys, Leuba mailed a questionnaire to leading scientists asking about their belief in “a God in intellectual and affective communication with humankind” and in “personal immortality.” Larson and Witham used the same wording as in the Leuba studies, and sent their questionnaire to 517 members of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences from the biological and physical sciences (the latter including mathematicians, physicists and astronomers). Consistent with the findings of Leuba, Larson and Witham found similar results indicating that 40 % of scientists believed in a personal God while 45 % said they did not.

In a more recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2009, scientist members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science were much less religious as a group compared to the general public. For example, survey results indicated that “scientists are roughly half as likely as the general public to believe in God or a higher power” compared to 95 % of Americans who believe in some form of deity or higher power based on findings from a 2006 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (Masci, 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, the Pew poll found that while 17 % of the general public indicated no religious affiliation (e.g., describing themselves as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular), nearly 50 % of scientists indicated no religious affiliation.

It would appear, however, that despite a greater amount of religious skepticism within the halls of academia, the majority of academics are religious believers. The recent nationally representative Politics of the American Professoriate study examined religious beliefs of American college and university professors and found that although atheism and agnosticism were more common among professors compared to the general population, such skepticism represented a minority view (Gross & Simmons, 2009). Among a wide variety of faculty members teaching at community colleges, 4-year colleges and universities, and both elite and nonelite doctoral universities, approximately 52 % of professors either agreed that “While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God” or “I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.” In this study, religious belief among academics did vary by type of institution with professors employed by elite doctoral universities being the least likely to endorse religious beliefs.

Religious belief also tends to vary by scientific or academic field. According to the survey conducted by Larson and Witham (1998), a belief in God was most popular among mathematicians (approximately 45 %) and least popular among physicists (approximately 22 %). The Pew Research Center poll described above also found scientists in the field of physics and astronomy to be the least likely, compared to those who work in other major scientific fields, to believe in God (approximately 29 %) (Masci, 2009). Surveys assessing a broader range of academic disciplines, such as the Politics of the American Professoriate study, have found similar results in that approximately 51 % of biologists surveyed were either atheists or agnostics (Gross & Simmons, 2009). Other academic fields were significantly more religious with the majority of accounting, elementary education, finance, marketing, art, criminal justice, nursing, management information, electrical engineering, computer science, business, history, and communication professors expressing some degree of belief in God. Professors in fields within

the social sciences were some of the least likely to express religious belief including economics, sociology, political science, and psychology. In this study, psychologists included the largest number of atheists and agnostics (61 %).

Other studies have also found low levels of religiosity among social scientists, and in particular, psychologists (e.g., Bergin & Jensen, 1990; Stark & Finke, 2000). Edward Shafranske (2001), for example, has conducted a number of different studies in which he compares the religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices of psychologists to those of the general population. In one study, 24 % of U.S. clinical and counseling psychologists reported a belief in a personal God compared to 90 % of Americans. Further, while only 26 % of clinical and counseling psychologists indicated that religion was very important to them, 58 % of a national sample of Americans did so. These findings suggest that the personal beliefs of many therapists are at odds with most of the clients they serve.

Although the majority of social scientists, as individuals, may not be particularly religious, the study of religion within the social sciences, has a rich history among psychologists, sociologists, and religious scholars. In recent years, in fact, there has been a growth in research and study among social scientists in religion, and nowhere is this more evident than in the field of the psychology of religion (Hart, 1999; Marks, 2006; Pargament et al., 2013). The field of psychology, over time, has developed an approach to integrating its foundation in science with the study of religion.

## 1.2 A History of the Relationship Between Religion, Spirituality, and Psychology

Although today the psychological study of religion – referred to as the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality – is a vibrant and growing field, enthusiasm and interest in the field has varied throughout its history. Scientific interest in the psychology of religion began in the 1880s and was a major area of study until the 1930s (Jones, 1994). William James, for example, published his seminal and influential work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in 1902. James believed that religious experiences should be studied empirically just like any other psychological experience. In particular, he argued the importance of the subjective experience of religion for the individual in contrast to naturalistic or deistic explanations. As a result, he discussed both positive and negative outcomes of religious experiences and focused on a variety of topics such as religious faith, conversion, mysticism, saintliness, and repentance. James believed that religion was a significant part of human experience and as a result required empirical study.

In contrast, several significant historical figures within psychology have taken an antagonistic stance toward religion. Sigmund Freud, for example, described religion as a belief in a father-god which includes obligatory rituals. He theorized that in the early years of life, children perceive parents and especially the father as

an all-powerful, yet loving figure, who provides protection from all woes of life. In later years, when internal and external factors in a person's life arouse a sense of helplessness, the person's longing for a powerful father figure finds its fulfillment in religion (Freud, 1912). Freud declared religion as an optimistic illusion, which was the result of wish fulfillment rather than reason. In *Future of an Illusion*, Freud (1927/1961) argued that the optimistic belief in a benevolent father-like God, who would reward us in the afterlife if we controlled our aggressive and sexual instincts, was an illusion essential for civilization. Without this illusion, people would be tempted to act out their aggressive and sexual instincts. However, this optimistic illusion came at a price. It entailed denial of the reality of sexual and aggressive instincts. Through the process of psychoanalysis, people could attain insight into the various defenses, neurotic compromises, and optimistic illusions they used to balance their need to fulfill sexual and aggressive impulses with their need to behave in a socially acceptable way. The goal of analysis was to attain a level of psychological maturity, where reality could be clearly perceived and where optimistic illusions could be discarded. Freud further contended that the only healthy solution was to forsake religion and rely on science, thus allowing a person and society to enjoy growth beyond the infantile stage.

Another important figure, B.F. Skinner, maintained that religious behavior is the same as all other behavior, which occurs or does not occur because it is either followed by reinforcement or punishment, respectively. Skinner described belief in God as an "archetype pattern of an explanatory fiction" maintained largely by fears promulgated by religious institutions (1971, p. 201). Individual behavior, therefore, was shaped and controlled through what Skinner believed were fear-inducing punitive practices to discourage "sinful" behavior such as threats of hell and damnation. Similarly, Albert Ellis, in his early writings, maintained that religion incorporated the concepts of sin and guilt which contributed to an unhealthy rather than healthy belief system. In other words, religious beliefs were pathological and could lead to self-defeating behavior or even neurosis (Ellis, 1960, 1962). Ellis later revised his position suggesting that this negative impact of religious belief may only be applicable to the devoutly religious (Ellis, 1992).

Although Freud's psychoanalysis and Skinner's behaviorism were the two major psychological paradigms during the twentieth century, there remained other psychologists who argued that religion could be beneficial. Carl Jung, for example, considered religion as an essential function of the human psyche in the *absence* of which individuals fall victim to various neuroses and psychoses (see Read, Fordham, & Adler, 1968). Erik Erickson was another proponent of religion who described how religion universalizes the qualities of faith, trust, and ego in the growing child and asserted that religion was vital in achieving a fully developed healthy personality (Erikson, 1963). Humanistic psychologists also concluded that human beings have a need for spirituality as they attempt to reach self-actualization (Kung, 1979).

In recent years, particularly beginning in the 1990s, attitudes of those in the field of psychology toward religion began to shift again toward more acceptance of religion and spirituality as a legitimate topic of inquiry. Many experts within the

field began to argue that the differences between scientific fields of study and religion are not that distinct or, at the least, that any differences suggest the need for dialogue and interplay between the fields (Gould, 1997; Haque, 1998; Jones, 1994). In 1997, Harvard University professor of biology, Stephen Jay Gould, invited dialogue between the fields of science and religion by proposing the concept of nonoverlapping magisteria (NOMA: Gould, 1997). This principle suggests that because the magisteria of science and religion do not overlap, the recognition of such allows, and perhaps requires, that the two realms provide feedback to one another with the common goal of uncovering knowledge, understanding, and truth. In a 1994 article, Jones similarly argued for an explicit and constructive relationship between psychology and religion. Jones called for recognition that the difference between science and other forms of human knowing are not as distinct as others have previously argued and cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive fields. Candy Gunther Brown (2012) in her recent book entitled *Testing Prayer*, argues that “empirical questions (even about matters involving religious practice) are valid topics for empirical study” and that “**both** science and religion are ways of **constructing** what is ‘real’ in the world rather than offering transparent windows onto reality” (emphasis added, pp. 6, 3).

Since the mid-twentieth century there have been many attempts to integrate psychology and religion and those efforts have met with some success. For example, several professional psychological and psychiatric organizations have been formed such as the Christian Association for Psychological Studies in 1953, the National Academy of Religion and Mental Health in 1954, and the American Foundation of Religion and Psychiatry in 1958. Within the American Psychological Association (APA), there is a separate division that focuses on issues of religion and spirituality. The division began in 1949, as a small group of individuals interested in psychology and religion that called themselves the American Catholic Psychological Association. This group later changed its name in 1970 to Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues and achieved division status (Division 36) within the APA in 1976. The Division changed its name once again in 1993 to the Psychology of Religion and recently adopted its current, more inclusive title, the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality in 2012 (Piedmont, 2013).

The field has also progressed in status with the creation of several psychology journals that focus specifically on the topic of psychology of religion. The publications that have emerged include the *Journal of Religion and Health* created in 1961, the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* established in 1973, the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* formed in 1982, and *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* which originated in 1990. Most recently, the APA journal of *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* was established in 2009. A number of handbooks and textbooks have also recently appeared, including the *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality* published in 2013 – the eighth publication in its reference line of handbooks focusing on core subfields within the field of psychology.

Yet, there continue to be many challenges in integrating the fields of psychology and religion. As noted by several leaders in the field, “The state of the discipline

today can be characterized as sufficiently developed but still overlooked, if not bypassed, by the whole of psychology” (Hill et al., 2000, p. 51). Indeed, as Jones noted in 1994, the topics of religion and religious belief are not included in most psychology textbooks. In addition, in a recent survey of APA leaders, just 40 % strongly agreed that “religion and spirituality are important topics for psychologists to consider when providing professional services,” and only 31 % strongly agreed that “religion and spirituality can be studied with scientific rigor” (McMinn, Hathaway, Woods, & Snow, 2009). In addition to the subfield’s marginal status within the field of psychology, psychologists in general lack training in the area of psychology and religion. According to a survey of training directors of counseling psychology programs in the U.S., for example, only 18 % of training directors indicated that their graduate program offered a course on religion or spirituality (Schulte, Skinner, & Claiborn, 2002). In another more inclusive study, only 13 % of training directors of clinical psychology programs in the United States and Canada reported that their curriculum included a course on religion and spirituality (Brawer, Handal, Fabricatore, Roberts, & Wajda-Johnston, 2002).

The subfield of Positive Psychology has a great deal to offer in efforts to address the challenges facing the field of psychology and religion. Positive psychology’s emphasis on meaning and life purpose along with its focus on core concepts, many of which have religious origins and are evident in religious practices, can provide a natural bridge for furthering understanding about the role of religion and spirituality in human functioning and interaction. In addition, a Positive Psychology perspective can be helpful in efforts to further integrate the study of psychology and religion as well as foster further integration of religion and spirituality into the broader field of psychology. Indeed, as noted by Christopher Peterson (2006), a key founder of this relatively new subfield, Positive Psychology’s emphasis “places the psychology of religion in a central place it has rarely occupied in the history of the discipline” (p. 6).

### ***1.2.1 Religion, Spirituality, and the Field of Positive Psychology***

Prior to World War II, psychology had three main missions: make the lives of all people fulfilling; identify and enhance human excellence; and treat pathology. In the last half-century, however, psychology has largely focused on decreasing maladaptive emotions and behaviors, while ignoring optimal functioning (e.g., character strengths and virtues). Psychologists have traditionally focused on the treatment of mental illness from a perspective of repairing damaged habits, damaged drives, damaged childhoods, and damaged brains. In recent years, however, many psychological researchers and practitioners have attempted to re-focus the field away from the study of human weakness and damage toward the promotion of well-being among individuals, families, and communities (Peterson, 2006;

Seligman, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This new movement within the field of psychology has been labeled Positive Psychology and its goal is to identify and enhance the human strengths and virtues that make life worth living (“The good life”) and allow individuals and communities to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

In 2004, Peterson and Seligman created a handbook for classifying character strengths and virtues. Based on their review of virtues and strengths referred to in major religious and philosophical traditions around the world, they identified 24 character strengths and organized them into “six core moral virtues that emerge consistently across cultures and throughout time” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 28). One of the six core virtues is transcendence, which includes several different character strengths including religiousness. Many of the other character strengths identified by Peterson and Seligman as important constructs within the field of Positive Psychology have long traditions within various religions (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003), including concepts such as love, gratitude, forgiveness, hope, wisdom, kindness, fairness, humility, prudence, and self-control. Therefore, one domain within the field of positive psychology is the study of religion/spirituality and related constructs as human strengths that have the potential to enhance an individual’s optimal existence and well-being.

Recent research supports the notion that religion and spirituality is associated with optimal existence and well-being, at least in part, through its function of providing life purpose and meaning. According to Seligman (2002) there are three elements that contribute to optimal human functioning and these have been termed the three pillars of positive psychology and include the pleasant life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life. All three of these pillars are associated with well-being and life satisfaction (Park, Peterson, & Ruch, 2009; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). However, engagement and meaning have been shown to be the most strongly associated with life satisfaction. Engagement occurs when one is using his or her strengths as much as possible and meaning emerges when one is using his or her strengths to belong and contribute to something greater than the self (Seligman, 2002). In 2007, Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, and Seligman surveyed a U.S. sample of 12,439 and a Swiss sample of 445 adults and found that for both samples, religiousness was most strongly associated with a meaningful life orientation, thus providing evidence that religion and spirituality are associated with life meaning. There have been numerous additional studies that have researched the relationship between religion/spirituality and life purpose, and findings indicate a positive relationship between various constructs and life purpose, such as mysticism (Byrd, Lear, & Schwenka, 2000), spiritual experiences (Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Zuttermeister, & Benson, 1991), religious conversion (Paloutzian et al., 1999), strength of religious faith (Byron & Miller-Perrin, 2009), and spiritual strivings (Emmons, 2005).

Positive Psychology is therefore an exemplary context, and provides a useful framework, within which to conceptualize the role of religion and spirituality in human behavior, relationships, and communities. In particular, it offers a great deal in our efforts to understand the various forces that promote health and well-being.

In addition, positive psychology emphasizes objectivity and the scientific method to answer critical questions about the impact of religion and spirituality on individuals' health and well-being as well as the health and well-being of various interpersonal relationships along with relationships within broader communities. Before examining the role of religion and spirituality in promoting optimal human functioning and interaction, it is imperative to examine how these constructs are typically defined and measured.

### 1.3 Definition and Measurement of Constructs

Social science researchers and practitioners have used a variety of conceptual and operational definitions in an attempt to capture the very complex constructs of religiosity, faith, spirituality, and optimal human functioning. Indeed, there are no universally accepted definitions for these terms. In the paragraphs that follow, we will attempt to provide some conceptual definitions of these constructs along with a discussion of several important issues to consider when defining and measuring them.

#### 1.3.1 *Religiosity and Spirituality*

Various sociological, legal, and psychological conceptual definitions of religiosity and spirituality have been offered in the research literature. During the latter part of the twentieth century, the term *religiosity* has come to be used to refer to an organized system of beliefs and rituals associated with an institutional structure while the term *spirituality* has come to be used to refer to a personal quest or connection to the divine that can occur either within or outside formal religion. In recent years, however, the relationship between these terms has been recognized by many experts as relatively complex (Hill et al., 2000; Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, several studies indicate that the general population views the meanings of these terms quite differently (Mattis, 2000; Schlehofer, Omoto, & Adelman, 2008; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). In addition, there are a significant number of U.S. citizens who identify as “spiritual not religious” (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind both the complexity inherent in defining these terms as well as the inadequacy of researchers to do so.

There have been many conceptual definitions of religiosity offered by researchers. In terms of psychology's original definition of religion, William James (1902/1999), frequently referred to as the father of psychology, wrote that religiosity refers to “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (pp. 31–32). Stark and Glock (1968), in their influential sociological model of religiosity, identified five dimensions of religious



commitment including: (1) *ideological*, which refers to the beliefs that a religious person holds, (2) *practice*, which refers to engaging in acts such as church services, Bible study, and prayer, (3) *experience*, which refers to one's feeling of closeness to, or power of, God, (4) *knowledge*, which refers to having a general understanding of the basic tenets of a particular religion, and (5) *consequential*, which refers to the manifestation of the previous four dimensions in one's day-to-day behavior. More recently, Wulff (1997) described that scholars have defined three important dimensions of religiosity based on his analysis of the main references in the literature which include the presence of: (1) motivation and commitment to a supernatural power, (2) affective states associated with a supernatural power, and (3) behavioral acts carried out in reference of the supernatural power. Others have additionally incorporated the importance of religion's role in urging individuals to search for answers to life's ultimate questions, thereby providing life meaning and purpose (Geertz, 1973; Heschel, 1958; Tillich, 1952).

Of note is the fact that these conceptual definitions of religiosity are broad enough to incorporate a spiritual component (Hill et al., 2000). In the recently released *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*, Pargament and his colleagues (Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013) define religion as "the search for significance that occurs within the context of established institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality" (p. 15). In this definition, the researchers highlight the fact that religiosity involves: a *search* that involves an ongoing journey of discovery and transformation, a *destination toward significance* which could include any number of goals such as psychological, social, physical, or spiritual, and an *institutional context* which refers to organizations whose goal is to foster individuals' connection with the sacred (Pargament et al., 2013).

Like religiosity, spirituality lacks a universally agreed upon conceptual definition. Some have defined spirituality as a relationship to something sacred. As noted by Sawatzky, Ratner, and Chiu (2005), spirituality refers to a unique relationship to an entity beyond the physical, psychological or social dimensions of life. Social scientists have also defined spirituality as a search for the sacred. According to the *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*, for example, spirituality involves a search that involves an ongoing journey of discovery of something sacred and a commitment to maintaining a connection to it (Pargament et al., 2013). Two elements are common to most definitions of spirituality and include the idea that spirituality involves an ongoing, motivated journey or pursuit and that the focus is on the sacred. Spirituality, for example, is commonly associated with an existential search for meaning and purpose (Larson et al., 1998; Thoresen, 1999; Chiu et al., 2004). Several researchers suggest that spirituality can be distinguished from other existential pursuits, ideologies, or life-giving practices by its orientation toward the sacred. The sacred refers to that which is set apart from the ordinary, or that which is divine, transcendent, immanent, ultimate, or boundless (Pargament et al., 2013; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Sacred entities can include God, a god-or divine-being, a Higher Power, or an ultimate reality (Sawatzky et al., 2005).

Others have argued that a unique aspect of spirituality is that it is typically defined by a person's subjective experiences and need not be expressed through predefined behaviors and practices, thus distinguishing it from religion (Sawatzky



et al., 2005). Spirituality is often viewed as separate from religion and may or may not be connected with it. What is determined to be spiritually “sacred” can vary from concepts such as various forms of deity (e.g., God or a Higher Power) to existential concerns (e.g., ultimate concerns, meaningful identity and purpose) to virtually any part of life (e.g., relationships, art, nature, etc.) and ultimately depends on the individual (Bollinger, 1969; Magill & McGreal, 1988; Pargament et al., 2013; Tillich, 1952). Spilka (1993) divided contemporary definitions of spirituality into one of three categories: (1) God-oriented (e.g., thought and practice are embedded in theologies), (2) world-oriented (e.g., the focus is on ecology or nature), and (3) people-oriented (e.g., human achievement and potential are stressed). Thus, conceptual definitions of spirituality often include broad definitions that extend beyond the boundaries of what has been traditionally viewed as religiosity or religiousness.

For our purposes, we adopt the broader term *faith* to refer to both elements of religion and spirituality to include a search for, and relationship to, the sacred or divine, both within and outside an institutional context. Although, as noted above, several studies indicate that the general population views the meanings of religion and spirituality to be quite different, and there are a significant number of U.S. citizens who identify as “spiritual not religious,” the majority of individuals in the U.S. label themselves as both religious and spiritual and there is consistent evidence of overlap between the two constructs (Marler & Hadaway, 2002; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Indeed, some have argued that the conceptual distinction between religion and spirituality is somewhat artificial because the two share many qualities that are often indistinguishable (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). We adopt the term *faith*, then, to refer to the gamut of theological beliefs, attitudes, moral norms, as well as behaviors and practices that individuals engage in, in connection with the sacred or divine. Like other researchers (e.g., Barrett, 2007), rather than narrowly specifying what faith is and attempting to explain it in whole, we have chosen to approach faith as various parts of a greater whole, identifying human emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and interactions that *might* be conceptualized as faith variables in an attempt to explain various links to optimal human functioning.

Conceptual definitions aside, many different operational definitions of religion and spirituality have been used in the research literature. Operational definitions focus on faith beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and experiences involved in people’s connection with the sacred in their lives, such as belief in God, personal religious commitment, attendance at religious services, prayer, spiritual experiences, and sense of calling. Researchers have also considered faith maturity as an indicator of faith, involving greater complexity, inclusivity, and figurative thinking on matters of faith. Finally, researchers have operationally defined faith in terms of orientation toward religion, involving whether the person is motivated to engage in religion by factors inherent or tangential to religious pursuits (Allport & Ross, 1967; Batson, 1976). These various operational definitions have been contextualized with regard to specific research questions, for example, within relationship research, studies have examined religious beliefs about a relationship, praying for a relationship

partner, discussing spiritual topics within a relationship, and attending church or engaging in religious activities together. Sanctification is another faith variable that has been contextualized within various research domains. Sanctification is a faith-based belief that an aspect of life has divine character or significance (Mahoney et al., 1999; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005), which has been applied specifically to behaviors, relationships, work, and other factors in life.

For the host of faith variables reviewed in this volume, it is important to note that the constructs used are not employed in a theological sense, but rather as psychological constructs. The variables are religious and spiritual to the extent that their point of reference is the sacred, however, they are psychological in nature because they focus on people's feelings, perceptions, and behaviors associated with the sacred and are studied with social scientific rather than theological methods. Although we include a broad and diverse range of faith variables, which might contribute to the complexity in communicating about research findings, we believe that including a variety of different definitions of faith will lead to a broader range of research findings. We hope that this inclusiveness will lead to a greater understanding of how and why faith is related to optimal human functioning. One exception to this inclusiveness is our focus on findings related to Judeo/Christian religious faith. Our primary focus on the Judeo/Christian perspective is driven by the fact that most research and available assessment measures are consistent with this perspective. However, where possible, we will highlight similarities and differences among different faith perspectives.

### ***1.3.2 Optimal Psychological Functioning***

Optimal psychological functioning can be operationally defined in a variety of ways. The various outcomes associated with religious faith that we include in the following chapters are many and varied. From a broad perspective, we consider psychological variables related to mental and emotional health on both individual and interpersonal levels. The variables we examine will be different for each topic discussed in this volume. For example, a great many research studies have included measures of subjective well-being as an outcome measure of "the good life." Most subjective well-being measures utilize self-report methodology whereby participants rate their subjective well-being on a numerical scale ranging, for example, from 1 to 10 (e.g., Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2001; Diener, Kesbir, & Lucas, 2008; Gallup Organization, 2006). Other research focused on emotional outcomes has examined high positive and low negative affect, satisfaction with life, purpose in life, meaning in life, and perceived well-being in specific domains of life.

Research examining various behavioral outcomes related to faith has focused on a number of different prosocial behaviors including altruism/helping behavior, forgiveness, and ethical and moral choices as well as various health-risk behaviors including alcohol consumption and sexual behavior. Operational definitions not only have varied across these topics, but also within a given subject area. The research on

altruism and forgiveness, for example, sometimes focuses on behavioral dispositions or intentions (e.g., one's tendency to help/forgive across situations or self-reported intention to help/forgive) and sometimes on overt behavior.

Research examining the impact of faith at the micro level, including communities and institutions and relationships among individuals and within families, has also included a range of outcome variables. When examining faith and relationships, we focus on relational outcome measures; specifically how faith variables relate to the quality of personal relationships, such as relationship partners being loving to one another, providing one another with emotional support, engaging in forgiveness, handling relationship conflicts in beneficial ways, and reporting high levels of relationship satisfaction. Our review of faith within communities focuses primarily on educational- and workplace-related outcomes at the individual-level such as academic achievement, educational aspirations, education satisfaction, work satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Throughout this volume, we will describe the unique operational definitions of outcome variables used by researchers that relate to faith.

### ***1.3.3 Goals and Objectives of This Book***

Faith matters because it often provides a sense of meaning and purpose that impacts the greater good. Faith also matters because it is associated with positive outcomes for individuals, for relationships, and for communities. This book will highlight faith from a positive psychology perspective, examining the relationship between faith, including religiosity and spirituality, and optimal psychological functioning. A study of faith from a positive psychology perspective takes a psychological rather than religious approach. It is the empirical study of faith-based thoughts, feelings, behavior, and social interaction as they relate to favorable outcomes. Hood et al. (2009) suggested that “psychologists of religion do not study religion per se; they study people in relation to their faith” (p. 4). In this book we focus more narrowly on the positive psychology of faith.

Our review will specifically incorporate the empirical literature on the role of faith and cognition, faith and emotion, and faith and behavior. We will focus on how these topics relate to individuals' sense of well-being, character strengths, virtues, and resilience. We will also incorporate information on how these faith concepts are relevant to interpersonal functioning in the context of family interactions (e.g., marriage/parenting) and friendships. Finally, we will take a community perspective to examine research on the role of faith constructs for well-being among individuals in various organizations and institutions. Each chapter will begin with an introduction to the topic, including essential definitions; will then provide an overview and discussion of the empirical literature; and will end with clinical implications for the field of psychology as well as suggestions for future research. Each chapter will also include a Chapter Summary which will provide a synopsis of the main empirical research findings described in each chapter.

Although the valence of the impact of faith is not solely positive, as noted previously, in keeping with a positive psychology focus, this book will primarily focus on outcomes that contribute to optimal human functioning rather than negative outcomes such as violence, aggression, and maladaptive functioning. Some have described such a focus as limited, and Pollyanna in nature, as if such a focus blindly and irrationally attends to only the optimal outcomes (Lazarus, 2003). We agree, however, with those in the field who have argued that focusing on optimal human functioning will ultimately contribute to a better understanding of all forms of human functioning and may be the most effective approach to solving problems (Diener, 2009; Peterson, 2006). Nevertheless, we do provide cautionary notes in each chapter that address some of the research findings relating faith to non optimal outcomes, but emphasize the potential for human flourishing even in the context of these findings.

In addition, we will approach our examination from the perspective that not all religions are the same (Prothero, 2010). In addition, the empirical research literature suggests that not all forms of one religion are the same when it comes to outcomes. As our review will show, there are specific beliefs, behaviors, emotions, and interactions in the context of Christianity that are related to both positive as well as negative outcomes. Because faith is a multidimensional construct, incorporating cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioral aspects, it might be that outcomes are dependent on various facets of faith that are measured (Hackney & Sanders, 2003). It may be that there is a central aspect to faith that is most relevant to optimal human functioning or it may be that some aspects of faith are associated with positive outcomes while others are associated with negative outcomes. Although we will primarily focus on the Judeo/Christian perspective because most research and available assessment measures are consistent with this perspective, where possible, we will highlight similarities and differences within and among different faith perspectives and our review will be written from a perspective of religious diversity, incorporating international and cross-cultural references.

It is important to note that our discussion throughout this volume is outside of a theological context. The research we cite and our conclusions are “psychospiritual” in nature meaning that the topics of this research are religious and spiritual in nature because their point of reference is the sacred. However, the constructs are employed at a psychological level, because the research focuses on matters such as people’s perceptions of what is sacred, rather than ontology, and the research uses social scientific rather than theological methods. Although our outcomes-based approach will not always indicate that faith is associated with positive outcomes, it is important to note that desired outcomes may be defined differently from religious versus psychological perspectives. An empirical approach alone cannot tell us whether faith is valuable or not. Faith, however, may be of inherent value from a theological or religious perspective, regardless of its associated psychological outcomes. Nevertheless, understanding how faith relates to various emotions, behaviors, cognitions, relationships, and communities is important in its own right, given the importance of faith to so many worldwide. Indeed, we need to understand more about faith, not only because it might be related to optimal human functioning, but because it is “a dimension of life that carries meaning and power in and of itself” (Pargament, 2002, p. 243).

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## Chapter 2

# Faith and Positive Emotions

From its inception, positive psychology has emphasized the importance of examining the subjective level of the human experience (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This includes positive emotions such as happiness, contentment, life satisfaction, optimism, hope, confidence, self-esteem, love, and gratitude. One of the great contributions of positive psychology to the broader field of psychology is the notion that focusing on positive emotions is as valuable as focusing on negative emotions. For example, experimental evidence suggests that positive emotions are valuable because they foster positive perceptions of self and others, sociability, altruism, effective conflict resolution skills, and physical health (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Likewise, longitudinal research shows that happiness is associated with positive outcomes such as people having superior mental and physical health, greater longevity, more satisfying relationships, and being more fulfilled and productive at work (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Gaining greater insight into positive emotions and their antecedents is crucial, given that positive emotions can exist independently from negative emotions (Ryff et al., 2006) and efforts to decrease negative emotions will not automatically result in increased positive emotions (see Schimmack, 2008 for a review). Research has begun to explore how positive emotions, which are typically short-lived, have such powerful effects in people's lives. Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory emphasizes that positive emotions enable people to thrive because they momentarily broaden their attention and perspective to help them discover and build cognitive, psychological, social, and physical resources. Thus, it seems that positive emotions not only increase satisfaction and well-being in the moment, but also help people build resources that lead to experiencing life as more satisfying and fulfilling in the long term. In this chapter we will review how faith can play a role in building positive emotions that have such far-reaching implications for people's lives.

It is important to keep in mind that links between faith and emotion are complex. For example, faith beliefs and practices can elicit positive emotions such as joy, tranquility, and compassion. Some of these emotions have a religious or spiritual nature, such as reverence, which involves deep veneration, often inspired by a deity.

At the same time, it is also true that certain emotions can elicit spiritual beliefs and experiences. For example, Valdesolo and Graham (2014) conducted experiments in which they randomly assigned individuals to experience the emotion of awe or general positive emotions or neutral emotions and found that inducing a sense of awe elicited stronger beliefs in supernatural control and greater belief in God. Much of the research we will review in this chapter is cross-sectional in nature, leaving open the possibility that faith is influencing emotional experiences or emotions are influencing faith characteristics, or both.

The research on links between faith and emotions includes a variety of definitions of faith, such as beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors involved in people's connection with the sacred in their lives. For the host of faith variables reviewed in this chapter, it is important to note that the constructs used are not employed in a theological sense, but rather as psychological constructs. The variables are religious and spiritual to the extent that their point of reference is the sacred; however, they are psychological in nature because they focus on people's perceptions of what is sacred and are studied with social scientific methods rather than theological methods.

We have selected specific emotion variables connected to faith on the basis of Fredrickson's (1998) description of positive emotions as ones that share a "pleasant subjective feel" (p. 300). Although a great deal of research has indicated that faith relates to decreases in negative emotions, we take a positive psychology approach by focusing on the adaptive and emotionally fulfilling aspects of faith, emphasizing research on links between faith and increases in positive emotions. The empirical literature has focused nearly exclusively on the outcome variables of happiness, life satisfaction, and subjective well-being.

We begin with an exploration of how religious groups differ in emotional experiences and how emotions might have a basis in faith, and then we examine how a variety of faith variables relate to various measures of emotional well-being. Given the vast amount of research that has been conducted linking faith variables to emotional well-being, we will provide an overview of themes from meta-analyses and literature reviews and focus on individual studies that are longitudinal in nature or involve diverse samples. Subsequently, we examine possible moderators as well as reasons for the links between faith and emotional well-being and explore the implications of the faith-emotion link to the field of psychology. Toward the end of the chapter, we also provide a cautionary note that highlights that some forms of faith are associated with negative emotions and declines in well-being. We close the chapter with suggestions for future research.

## 2.1 Religious Differences in the Experience of Emotions

Before reviewing how faith relates to emotional well-being, we first explore how religious differences relate to differences in the experience of emotions and whether certain emotions might have a basis in faith. Faith consists not only of beliefs and

behaviors, but also of emotional experiences. Empirical research indicates that being religious is associated with distinct emotional processing, including reporting more vivid and intense emotional experiences, but also being less able to differentiate emotions (Burris & Petrican, 2011). This may have a neurophysiological basis, with religious individuals being more likely to exhibit right-hemispheric dominance than atheists. This right-hemispheric dominance is associated with higher levels of perceiving and experiencing emotions. Burris and Petrican (2011) theorized that faith might provide a narrative for religious individuals to understand the intense, yet undifferentiated emotions that they are more likely to experience than atheists. Along these lines, psychologists have explored how religion can be a source of profound emotional experiences (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Hood, 2005). For example, those higher in religiosity and spirituality are more inclined to experience feelings of gratitude than those who are less religious or spiritual (Emmons & Mishra, 2012).

In addition to emotional differences between those high and low in religiosity or spirituality, emotional experiences also differ across religious traditions, ranging from intense positive emotions to calming emotional quietude (Emmons, 2005). For example, Kim-Prieto and Diener (2009) compared a large sample of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish participants from 49 countries regarding the extent to which they experienced nine distinct emotions. They found that there were many significant differences between the religious groups in the amounts of each emotion experienced. In considering the religious groups that scored consistently higher or lower than at least three of the four other religious groups on a particular emotion, Christians reported experiencing more love and less shame and anger; Muslims reported experiencing more sadness, guilt, shame, and jealousy; Hindus reported experiencing less gratitude and pride; and Buddhists reported experiencing less pride and more guilt. A follow-up study among Christian college students further indicated that the link between religion and emotion can be experimentally induced, as participants who were asked to identify their religion prior to completing ratings of emotions reported experiencing more love than those who completed emotion ratings without being asked to identify their religious affiliation first (Kim-Prieto & Diener, 2009).

One potential reason for religious differences in the types of emotions that are experienced is that different religions place emphasis and value on different emotions. This occurs through religious texts, icons, and relics (Tsai, Koopmann-Holm, Miyazaki, & Ochs, 2013). For example, Tsai, Miao, and Seppala (2007) compared ideal affect in Buddhism and Christianity by considering classical and contemporary texts and insights from practitioners. They found that Christians endorsed high-arousal positive emotions, such as excitement, more than Buddhists, and Buddhists valued low-arousal positive emotions, such as peacefulness, more than Christians. Similarly, when Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish college students in the U.S. were asked to rate the degree to which nine emotions were considered desirable by their religion, Christian participants emphasized love more than Buddhist and Muslim participants; Buddhist participants placed less emphasis on sadness than Christian and Muslim participants; Muslim participants

placed more emphasis on shame than Hindu participants; and Jewish participants placed more emphasis on pride than Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu participants and more emphasis on happiness than Buddhist participants (Kim-Prieto & Diener, 2009). However, it should be noted that the group sizes were unequal, and the number of Muslim and Jewish participants was low ( $n = 11$  and  $19$  respectively).

## 2.2 Faith-Based Emotions

Religious differences in the value and experience of different emotions raises the question of whether some emotions are religious or spiritual in nature. Within the psychology literature, numerous emotions have been labeled religious, spiritual, or sacred. These include emotions such as gratitude, compassion, empathy, humility, contentment, love, adoration, reverence, awe, elevation, hope, forgiveness, tolerance, loving-kindness, responsibility, contrition, joy, peace, trust, duty, obligation, and protectiveness (Emmons, 2005; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005; Plante, 2012; Roberts, 2007; Vaillant, 2008). The nature of faith-based emotions raises complex questions, such as: Are these emotions always religious or spiritual in nature? Do they exist in distinct secular and spiritual forms? Is one subsumed under the umbrella of the other? For example, is faith-based hope merely a particular form of general hope or could it be that all hope is rooted in a greater spiritual reality?

Psychologists have taken a variety of approaches to conceptualizing how key emotions relate to faith. Maslow (1964), for example, observed that religious words were reported by “non-theistic people in their effort to describe particular subjective happenings in ‘non-religious’ (in the conventional sense) peak experiences and illuminations” (p. 5). Maslow believed individuals made use of religious terms to describe peak experiences for lack of a different vocabulary. Maslow himself made use of what he considered religious and spiritual terms to refer to people’s subjective experiences, even though he viewed those experiences as occurring within human nature and without supernatural reference. Thus, he referred to spiritual emotions and experiences intending to convey naturalistic meaning. In contrast, William James (1902) identified religious emotions as psychic entities distinguishable from other emotions. However, he did not consider faith-based emotions to be a distinct form of affect, but described them simply as general emotions directed at a religious object or supernatural relationship. Similar thinking is reflected in the work of many contemporary psychologists, who have suggested that emotions can be experienced in spiritual and non-spiritual forms. For example, Emmons and Crumpler (2000) have described both psychological and religious theories for gratitude, indicating that gratitude bridges theological and psychological understandings of human nature. Similarly, Keltner and Haidt (2003) indicated that the emotion of awe can be triggered by religious encounters, but equally by objects and events in other areas of life, such as politics, nature, and art. Along these lines, Tangney (2000) has suggested

that humility is an overarching construct that may have religious dimensions. She indicated that for some, humility in its general form results from knowledge that humans are limited in comparison to a higher power.

The ambiguity regarding the spiritual nature of certain emotions complicates a review of the literature of faith-based emotions. It seems overzealous to assume that all research on emotions such as joy, gratitude, love, or others can be assumed to refer to a religious or spiritual experience of these emotions. We propose three avenues through which it is possible to examine emotions occurring in a specifically spiritual or sacred form: (1) research that measures emotions that are operationalized in an explicitly faith-based way, such as *spiritual peace* or *religious contrition*; (2) research assessing emotions that are experienced related to a Higher Power, such as gratitude toward a deity or feeling loved by God; (3) and research on emotions evoked as the focus of a religious practice, such as joy experienced through religious worship. Rather than providing an exhaustive overview of research meeting these criteria, we have chosen to provide some examples of empirical research that fits each of these ways of studying faith-based emotions.

### ***2.2.1 Assessing Emotions Defined as Explicitly Spiritual or Religious***

Research on emotions that are defined in an explicitly religious or spiritual way has primarily focused on how these faith-based emotions are brought about. Emmons (2005) has suggested several factors associated with experiencing sacred emotions, including that spiritual emotions are promoted by religious and spiritual systems and that they are more likely to be experienced in religious settings, through spiritual or religious practices, by individuals who identify as religious or spiritual, and about aspects of life considered to be sacred. Pargament and Mahoney (2005) have further described how imbuing aspects of life with spiritual significance is likely to elicit faith-based emotions. There is some empirical support for these theories. For example, a study of couples in the U.S. expecting their first child indicated that more frequent religious service attendance and prayer, more conservative beliefs about the Bible, and greater perceptions of the marriage and pregnancy as sacred were all associated with experiencing more spiritual emotions (Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2009). The spiritual emotions were defined for participants as explicitly spiritual in nature, such as feeling spiritually uplifted, feeling spiritually inspired, or feeling positive emotions toward a Higher Power. It is noteworthy that viewing the marriage and pregnancy as sacred was predictive of spiritual emotions beyond the measure of general religiousness, involving religious service attendance, prayer, and Biblical conservatism. Thus, viewing aspects of life as sacred seems to predict spiritual emotions to an even greater degree than simply being a religious or spiritual person or being engaged in religious beliefs and practices.

Interestingly, it seems that positive spiritual emotions are relevant not only to family transitions that are considered positive, but also to difficult transitions. In a longitudinal study of divorce, turning to God in one's efforts to forgive the circumstances surrounding the divorce at the time it occurred was associated with higher levels of positive, explicitly spiritual emotions 1 year later (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2008). These findings remained when controlling relevant demographic factors and participants' previous levels of positive spiritual emotions. Thus, it appears that incorporating one's faith into complex human processes, such as forgiveness, can be related to experiencing more positive spiritual emotions.

Unfortunately, little research has been conducted in a way that operationalizes emotions in an explicitly religious, spiritual, or sacred way. Available research has focused on sacred emotions primarily as an outcome measure. It would be worthwhile to examine faith-based emotions as predictor variables as well. For example, it would be fruitful to know whether positive spiritual emotions mirror or even surpass general positive emotions in terms of the positive life effects they elicit.

## ***2.2.2 Assessing Emotions Related to a Higher Power***

In addition to defining emotions themselves as explicitly religious or spiritual, another way to assess faith-based emotions is to ask people about the emotions they experience in relation to God or a Higher Power. Numerous studies have examined positive emotions experienced in relation to God, such as love and gratitude, as well as negative emotions, such as fear and anger. In this section we will focus on one positive emotion experienced toward God and one positive emotion experienced from God: gratitude toward God and feeling loved by God.

### **2.2.2.1 Gratitude Toward God**

Gratitude has been conceptualized as a moral emotion that involves the perception of intentional benevolence from another (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). It is valued and promoted by the major world religions (Rye, Wade, Fleri, & Kidwell, 2013) and empirical links have been observed between gratitude and measures of religion and spirituality (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Nevertheless, most research on gratitude has been conducted outside of an explicitly religious context (Carlisle & Tsang, 2013). Here, we consider the limited empirical research that has specifically examined gratitude felt toward God, most of which has been conducted by Krause, and is focused on older adults in the U.S.

Cross-sectional research has highlighted various predictor variables of gratitude toward God, including church attendance (Krause, 2012; Krause & Bastida, 2012), religious commitment (Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Cohen, Galler, & Krumrei, 2011), having a sense of religious meaning in life and receiving spiritual support from one's church community (Krause, 2012), and seeing the connectedness that exists

among all people (Krause & Bastida, 2012). Longitudinal research has indicated that feeling closely connected to others in one's church community is associated with feeling more grateful to God over time (Krause & Ellison, 2009). In addition, levels of gratitude toward God seem to differ across demographic characteristics. There is some indication that women are more likely to feel grateful to God than men (Krause, 2006) and that African Americans and Mexican Americans experience more gratitude toward God than Caucasian Americans (Krause, 2012). These findings are consistent with research showing that those who belong to minority or oppressed groups tend to be more religious in general (e.g., Pargament, 1997).

Even less is known about the outcomes of feeling grateful toward God. A large nationwide study indicated that feeling more grateful toward God was associated with less death anxiety among older Mexican Americans (Krause & Bastida, 2012). In addition, feelings of gratitude toward God seem to buffer the negative effects of stress on health among older adults living in a deteriorated neighborhood (Krause, 2006). Finally, in a younger sample (average age 28 years), feeling grateful to God was associated with higher levels of positive affect, happiness, and life satisfaction (Rosmarin et al., 2011). Clearly, more research is needed to examine how feelings of gratitude toward God benefit individuals.

### 2.2.2.2 Feeling Loved by God

Next we turn to the emotional experience of feeling loved by God, captured by *God image* studies. The concept of *God image*, grounded in the work of Rizzuto (1979), refers to a person's emotional experience of God. The affective representations that one holds of God consist of memories of experiences with God, rather than of conceptual information that has been learned about God. Research indicates that often people's personal images of God differ from the normative image of God they believe they should have according to religious culture (Jonker, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Zock, & Jonker, 2007). As Lawrence (1997) described it, "God image is a psychological working internal model of the sort of person that the individual imagines God to be" (p. 214).

Numerous studies across multiple countries have examined the implications of feeling loved by God. For example, large-scale studies with representative U.S. samples have indicated that experiencing God as loving is associated with less negative emotions and fewer mental health problems, including less depression and anxiety (Bradshaw, Ellison, & Flannelly, 2008; Flannelly, Galek, Ellison, & Koenig, 2010). Smaller studies have been conducted in other countries demonstrating links between feeling loved by God and experiencing more positive emotions. For example, in a Belgian study, a positive emotional experience of God's love was associated with greater happiness among chronic pain patients (Dezutter et al., 2010). In addition, a Canadian study of adults who had been sexually abused as children demonstrated that greater feelings of being loved by God were associated with greater personal growth, greater resolution of the abuse, and less depression (Gall, Basque, Damasceno-Scott, & Vardy, 2007). Furthermore, in this study, experiencing feelings of love from God was associated with having more feelings



of hope and self-acceptance, which were two of the factors associated with experiencing a greater sense of resolution about the abuse history and less depressed mood. Two additional small, Canadian studies were conducted among women who had experienced breast cancer and men who had prostate cancer. Among the women, feeling loved by God was associated with lower levels of psychological distress (Gall, Miguez de Renart, & Boonstra, 2000). In addition, feeling a sense of God's presence and God's control in life was associated with greater levels of optimism. Among the men, feeling loved by God was associated with better mental health and emotional functioning (Gall, 2004). Finally, a small study among older adults in Switzerland indicated a strong relationship between directly experiencing the nearness of a guiding, shelter-giving God and feeling emotionally stable (Chukwu & Rauchfleisch, 2002).

Thus, it seems that positive feelings about God, including feeling loved and cared for by God, can be associated with personal growth and emotional well-being. While there are a fair number of studies with diverse samples relating experiencing God as loving to positive outcomes, this research is of a self-report nature and correlational design. Longitudinal and experimental research is needed to establish how feeling loved by God relates to well-being.

### ***2.2.3 Assessing Emotions Evoked by Religious or Spiritual Practices***

In addition to considering emotions defined as sacred and emotions experienced toward a Higher Power, another way to study faith-based emotions is to examine emotions that are central to faith practices. For example, Hindus may engage in religious practices such as devotion, action, or meditation to achieve *Ānanda*, a form of delight or bliss. Similarly, most religions offer purification rituals that result in feelings of purity, holiness, or blamelessness. Unfortunately, very little research exists on the emotions inherent to religious activities. For example, a psycINFO search resulted in little to no quantitative research measuring the emotions associated with religious devotion, worship, purification, confession, pilgrimage, or baptism. Later in this chapter we review research indicating that engaging in religious practices is associated with experiencing more positive emotions in life. In this section, we focus on favorable emotions that are inherent to faith practices while they are taking place. Specifically, we will highlight research on the emotions associated with glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and loving-kindness meditation.

#### **2.2.3.1 Glossolalia**

Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is considered a mental or emotional state associated with Pentecostal religious traditions in which an individual speaks in

an incomprehensible language over which he or she claims to have no control (Newberg, Wintering, Morgan, & Waldman, 2006). While little research has examined the emotions associated with glossolalia, there is some indication that this religious practice involves heightened emotions. For example, in a small qualitative study about the first experience of glossolalia during spirit baptism, all eight participants indicated that the experience was associated with a magnification or expansion of affect, such as feelings of intoxication and abundant love, peace, happiness, and joy (Williamson & Hood, 2011). A neuroimaging study of glossolalia involving singing, vocal utterances, and ecstatic bodily experiences found a trend towards increased activity in the right amygdala, which is consistent with glossolalia being a highly emotional state. However, it should be noted that others have described a gentler form of glossolalia, more similar to quiet prayer, that is associated with calm, pleasant emotions (Grady & Loewenthal, 1997). Thus, preliminary findings suggest that the religious practice of glossolalia is associated with heightened emotions that range in nature, but are experienced as positive.

### 2.2.3.2 Loving-Kindness Meditation

Another example of emotions inherent to a faith practice includes the divine emotions of loving-kindness, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity experienced through the Buddhist Brahma Viharas meditation (Salzberg, 2002). Of these four emotions, loving-kindness has been studied most. Research on loving-kindness meditation is ideal for considering how faith-based emotions relate to outcomes, as data has been collected before and after interventions in which participants focus on evoking this sacred emotion, and the outcomes have been compared to control groups who have not focused on a sacred emotion.

Loving-kindness involves feelings of warmth and caring for self and others. It is an unselfish kindness that is felt toward all people. It is cultivated through an emotion-focused meditation practice that involves directing one's emotions toward warm and tender feelings in an open-hearted way (Shapiro & Sahgal, 2012). In loving-kindness meditation, people cultivate the intention to experience loving-kindness not only during the meditation itself, but also in their lives more generally. Loving-kindness meditation has been considered a reliable method of eliciting the emotion of loving-kindness, involving love, contentment, and compassion (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). In considering the outcome research on this form of meditation, it is important to acknowledge that the practice involves not only a focus on loving-kindness, but also physical and cognitive features of contemplation and meditation, such as closing one's eyes, focusing on breathing, and gaining insight. These meditative factors should be acknowledged when considering the potential outcomes of the emotion of loving-kindness. However, recent research supports that loving-kindness mediation is neurologically unique from other forms of mediation, suggesting that the outcomes of loving-kindness are not strictly the result of engaging in a meditation practice. For example, concentration and awareness forms of meditation elicit different brain

activity than loving-kindness meditation (Brewer et al., 2011). In one study, when presented with pictures displaying sad affect, practitioners of loving-kindness meditation displayed neural activity associated with emotional regulation processes, whereas the neural activity of practitioners of focused-attention meditation viewing images of sad faces exhibited attention-related processing (Lee et al., 2012). This is consistent with the finding that those who do and do not practice loving-kindness meditation display differences in brain structure and neural activity. Specifically, those who practice loving-kindness meditation have more gray matter volume in brain regions involved in regulating affect such as empathy, anxiety, and mood (Leung et al., 2013). Given that loving-kindness meditation has unique outcomes from other forms of meditation, it seems warranted to conclude that the outcomes of loving-kindness meditation can, at least in part, be attributed to the cultivation of a sacred emotion, and not only to the experience of engaging in meditation.

Outcome studies of loving-kindness meditation have indicated that loving-kindness is associated with decreased negative emotions and mental health symptoms and increased positive emotions. For example, among chronic pain patients, those engaging in 8 weeks of loving-kindness meditation reported improvements in psychological distress compared to those who did not engage in loving-kindness meditation (Carson et al., 2005). The greater the amount of time they spent in loving-kindness meditation on a given day, the lower their levels of anger were the following day. In addition, there is a growing body of literature indicating that loving-kindness meditation is associated with increases in positive emotions. In a study in which participants were assigned to either a one-time loving-kindness meditation or a one-time neutral imagery induction, the mood of participants in the loving-kindness condition became more positive, while the mood of those in the control condition did not change (Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, 2008). Those in the loving-kindness condition also displayed greater increases in feeling positively toward others. Other studies have shown that the effects of loving-kindness last beyond the meditation period. In comparison to a waitlist control group, participants who engaged in 7 weeks of loving-kindness meditation displayed greater increases in positive emotions, including love, joy, gratitude, contentment, hope, pride, interest, amusement, and awe (Fredrickson et al., 2008). The increases in positive emotions were related to benefits in many areas of life, including greater self-acceptance, positive relations with others, good physical health, and greater life-satisfaction. A 15-month follow-up survey of these participants indicated that those who continued meditating following the initial study showed more positive emotions than those who had not, but that all participants maintained positive life gains that had resulted from the initial intervention, whether or not they continued meditating (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010). Thus, it seems that increases in loving-kindness are related to elevations in daily experiences of positive emotions, which offer long-term gains in many aspects of people's lives.

### ***2.2.4 The Uniqueness of Faith-Based Emotions***

The research we have reviewed indicates that both theistic and nontheistic faith-based emotions are associated with a range of positive outcomes in people's lives. However, the question remains whether faith-based emotions are unique from or similar to secular emotions in their positive outcomes. Consider, for example, the emotion of gratitude. Gratitude has been defined as the emotional response to receiving a gift (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). This implies that gratitude toward God can occur for all things a person attributes to God, whereas non-religious gratitude may be constrained to contexts in which something good is received from another person. Little research is available to speak to the question of whether faith-based emotions are distinguishable from secular emotions. One exception is a study that examined whether there was a difference between general gratitude and faith-based gratitude within a religiously diverse sample in the U.S. (Rosmarin et al., 2011). Participants in this study completed a standard measure of their disposition to experience gratitude with items that were not explicitly religious in nature. The same measure was used to assess religious gratitude with participants completing each item modified to direct gratitude specifically toward God. The results indicated that an interaction between religious commitment and religious gratitude accounted for unique variance in participants' well-being, including more happiness, life satisfaction, positive affect, and mental health, after controlling for the effects of general gratitude. These findings suggest that while gratitude was associated with greater well-being regardless of religiosity, religious gratitude had an additional positive effect on well-being for individuals who were religiously committed. This study was further able to elucidate previous research linking gratitude to religiosity, in that the relationship between religious commitment and general gratitude was fully mediated by religious gratitude, suggesting that religion is associated with gratitude specifically because religious individuals are grateful to God. While it is difficult to base conclusions regarding the similarities and differences between faith-based emotions and secular emotions on one study, there seems to be an indication that faith-based gratitude offers unique benefits beyond gratitude in general, at least for those who are religious. More research is needed to evaluate whether similar patterns exist for other faith-based emotions.

## **2.3 Faith Predictors of Positive Emotions and Well-Being**

As noted in the previous chapter, many individuals throughout the world adhere to a religious faith. Here, we consider research that has consistently shown that faith is related to positive emotional outcomes. For example, in the U.S., an analysis of more than 676,000 Gallup interviews indicated that Americans for whom religion is an important part of daily life have higher levels of emotional health and feel more positively about their present and future life situations than individuals for whom

religion is not as important (Newport, Witters, & Agrawal, 2012). These links hold up after controlling for relevant demographic variables such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, region, socio-economic status, marital status, and child-bearing status. The amount of research that has been conducted on faith in relation to positive emotions and well-being is so vast that many systematic reviews of literature and meta-analyses have been published on the topic. Therefore, we provide an overview of what is known about links between faith and emotional well-being by summarizing and highlighting the themes of previous syntheses of research, including considering religious coping and potential moderators. We then focus greater attention on longitudinal research on this topic, in order to consider the directionality of the links between faith and emotional well-being.

Many literature reviews have been conducted on the relationship between faith and emotional well-being. For example, Koenig, McCullough, and Larson (2001) conducted a systematic review of 850 studies relating religion to mental health. Of the 102 studies relating faith to life satisfaction, happiness, positive affect, or higher morale, 79 % found a positive association. Similarly, among the studies addressing links between faith and hope, optimism, purpose, or meaning, the vast majority demonstrated positive associations. An updated review located 224 new quantitative studies on faith and well-being, with 78 % finding a positive association, 5 % reporting mixed or complex findings, 17 % reporting no association, and only 1 % finding a negative relationship between faith and greater well-being (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). Similar trends have been found among adolescents. In a review of 20 studies addressing religion and spirituality in relation to mental health among adolescents, 90 % of the studies found positive links, indicating that faith was associated with positive affect and emotional well-being (Wong, Rew, & Slaikeu, 2006).

### ***2.3.1 The Size and Nature of the Relationship Between Faith and Emotional Well-Being***

Numerous recent meta-analyses have provided quantitative evaluations of the strength of the relationship between faith and emotional well-being. A meta-analysis of 35 studies (total number of participants not reported), for example, indicated that there is a small, positive relationship ( $r = 0.10$ ) between religion and psychological adjustment, which included high life-satisfaction, self-esteem, happiness, and other positive feelings (Hackney & Sanders, 2003). Religion was defined as people's traditional, institutionalized efforts to have a relationship with the transcendent. A meta-analysis of 49 studies with a combined sample of 22,554 participants indicated that there is a moderate positive relationship ( $r = 0.34$ ) between spirituality and a person's satisfaction with the quality of his or her life as a whole (Sawatzky, Ratner, & Chiu, 2005). Spirituality was defined as any aspect of people's relationship to a Higher Power or the transcendent, not necessarily occurring within an institutional context. Similar results were found for younger

individuals in a meta-analysis of 75 studies with a combined sample of 66,273 participants aged 12–25, among whom both religion and spirituality were associated with favourable psychological outcomes (Yonker, Schnabelrauch, & DeHaan, 2012). These findings included positive links between faith and self-esteem ( $r = .11$ ) and well-being, which included life satisfaction, happiness, and positive mood ( $r = .16$ ).

These meta-analyses suggest that faith is related to being satisfied in life. They also highlight that certain aspects of faith are more closely related to well-being than others. For example, Hackney and Sanders (2003) found that the relationship to positive psychological adjustment was strongest for personal, internalized devotion, which included intrinsic religious orientation, emotional attachment to God, intensity of devotion, and colloquial prayer. This was followed by less strong links between psychological adjustment and religious ideology, including religious attitudes, belief salience, and fundamentalism. Finally, the weakest relationship to psychological adjustment was present for social and behavioral aspects of religion, such as attendance at religious services, participation in church activities, extrinsic religious orientation, and participation in ritual prayer. These findings suggest that internalizing the beliefs and values of one's faith and being personally motivated in one's faith are more important to well-being than particular religious ideologies or participating in religious activities.

With regard to spirituality, Sawatzky et al. (2005) found that the relationship to quality of life was stronger for existential spirituality than for relational spirituality or general ratings of religion/spirituality. Thus, it seems that finding a sense of meaning and purpose through one's orientation to the sacred is associated with life-satisfaction, even more so than the strength of one's relationship with a Higher Power or one's general self-ratings of religiosity and spirituality. Consistent with Sawatzky et al.'s, but in contrast to Hackney and Sanders's (2003) analyses of mostly adult samples, Wong et al. (2006) found in their review that existential and institutional measures of faith were the most salient predictors of well-being among adolescents, more so than measures of personal devotion and ideology. Thus, age may impact which aspects of faith are most influential for well-being, with social and behavioral aspects of institutional religion and spirituality being particularly beneficial to adolescents in comparison to adults.

### ***2.3.2 Religious Coping as an Aspect of Faith Linked to Emotional Well-Being***

One particular way that individuals may benefit from greater well-being through their faith is that faith offers mechanisms for coping with distress. Overall, the research literature indicates that faith is related to well-being for many individuals, but that the relationship may be strongest among those facing stressors in life (Moreira-Almeida, Neto, & Koenig, 2006). Research indicates that among

both adults and children, faith has been associated with better adjustment and more post-traumatic growth following trauma, including the experience of greater appreciation for life, a greater sense of personal strength, greater recognition of new possibilities, and warmer, more intimate relationships with others (Bryant-Davis et al., 2012; Schaefer, Blazer, & Koenig, 2008; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). Literature reviews have indicated that faith variables, such as religiosity, spirituality, religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors, spiritual well-being, and positive religious coping, have been associated with greater emotional well-being, including greater life satisfaction, hope, resilience, and post-traumatic growth among the physically ill (Stewart & Yuen, 2011), including individuals with cancer (Masters & Hooker, 2013; Visser, Garssen, & Vingerhoets, 2010), HIV/AIDS (Biswas, 2007; Dalmida, 2006), cardiovascular disease (Masters, & Hooker, 2013), burn victims (Askay & Magyar-Russell, 2009) and those in palliative care (Sinclair, Pereira, & Raffin, 2006). Faith is particularly important to emotional well-being and hope among people facing the end of life due to terminal illness or old age (Reid, 2012; Van Ness & Larson, 2002). Beyond coping with physical struggles, faith is also relevant to emotional well-being and hope among those with mental illness (Schrank, Bird, Rudnick, & Slade, 2012). Thus, the consistent finding is that faith can be a powerful resource for many people struggling with difficult life events.

Pargament (1997) has described many of the helpful ways that people draw on their faith in the face of stress. Positive religious coping methods include behaviors such as:

- seeking solace and comfort from God, transcendent forces, or one's religious community
- seeking help from God for problem-solving
- engaging in religious activities or providing spiritual support to others to get one's mind off of a stressor
- using one's faith to let go of negative emotions associated with a stressor, such as emotional pain, fear, and anger
- seeking spiritual cleansing or using religion to achieve a life transformation
- using faith to view a stressor in a more positive light, such as considering it to be a lesson from God, or an impetus for spiritual growth (discussed in more detail in Chap. 4)

Literature reviews have indicated that these positive forms of religious coping are associated with improved mood and greater self-esteem, life satisfaction, and quality of life in both community and clinical samples (Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari, & Pargament, 2001). For example, a meta-analysis of 49 studies examining the relationship between religious coping and psychological adjustment among a total of 13,512 participants dealing with a host of stressful life situations indicated that positive religious coping was moderately associated with positive psychological adjustment to stressful events (effect size = 0.33), including greater stress-related growth, spiritual growth, positive affect, and self-esteem (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). Furthermore, a meta-analysis of 103 studies about

the psychosocial factors related to post-traumatic growth revealed that religious coping was the strongest predictor of positive psychological changes in the aftermath of extremely stressful events (effect size = 0.38, based on 31 studies with 6,188 participants; Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009). The effect of religious coping surpassed that of other, secular forms of coping, such as interpersonal coping (e.g., social support) and intrapersonal coping (e.g., optimism).

### ***2.3.3 Possible Moderators of the Relationship Between Faith and Emotional Well-Being***

Meta-analyses that have been conducted on the relationship between faith variables and well-being shed light on individual characteristics that may moderate the relationship between faith and emotional well-being. In most analyses, significant heterogeneity of effect sizes remained after classifying faith variables and well-being variables into groups, suggesting the presence of moderators in the relationship between faith and emotional well-being. While some meta-analyses found no differences in effect sizes across gender, age, or ethnicity (e.g., Sawatzky et al., 2005), this may have been due to missing information in the primary studies. There is some evidence that the relationship between faith and well-being differs across age groups, with the strongest links being present at older ages (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009). The majority of research has linked faith to greater well-being, including happiness, life-satisfaction, self-esteem, and emotional adjustment, among older adults (Levin, 1997). In Yonker et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis, age moderated links between religion/spirituality and self-esteem, with a significant relationship being present for emerging adults (aged 18–25 years) rather than adolescents (aged 12–17 years). Similarly, Wong et al. (2006) concluded that of the few studies that examined age as a moderator of the relationship between faith and well-being among adolescents, each found that the relationship was stronger for older adolescents compared to younger ones.

In addition to age, race and gender have been examined as moderators of the relationship between faith and well-being. In Hackney and Sanders's (2003) meta-analysis, effect sizes for the relationship between faith and well-being were larger for African-American participants than for Caucasian participants. Perhaps the effects of religion are felt more strongly among groups for whom religion is more salient, as previous research has indicated that religion is more common among ethnic minorities (e.g., Douglas, Jimenez, Lin, & Frisman, 2008). Finally, studies of gender as a moderator have provided mixed results. Prati and Pietrantonio (2009) found that the relationship between engaging in religious coping and experiencing posttraumatic growth was stronger for women than for men. Again, perhaps this is due to the fact that religion tends to be a more salient factor for women than for men (e.g., Pargament, 1997). However, in contrast, Wong et al.'s (2006) review of research with adolescents indicated that of seven studies examining gender as a



moderator, four found that the relationship between faith and well-being was stronger among males than females, while one study found the relationship was stronger for females than males. This number of studies is too small to draw definitive conclusions, meaning that more research should examine whether gender moderates links between faith and well-being among youth, and if so, whether this is in a different direction than among adults.

Regardless of potential demographic differences in the *strength* of the relationship between faith and well-being, research seems to indicate that there are significant links between faith and emotional well-being for diverse populations across a variety of life situations. The size of this relationship averaged across all studies within meta-analyses is small to moderate. Next, we will consider the directionality of this relationship.

### ***2.3.4 Directionality in the Relationship Between Faith and Emotional Well-Being***

A key question that emerges from this body of literature is whether faith is able to *elicit* emotional well-being. Some alternative explanations are that those who experience emotional well-being and happiness gravitate toward faith, or that emotional well-being stems from other positive factors associated with faith, such as social support or healthy lifestyles. Longitudinal research allows us to begin to address this question by considering whether faith precedes emotional well-being in time or vice versa. In the largest reviews of literature, longitudinal studies have shown similar positive links between faith and emotional well-being as cross-sectional studies. For example, among the prospective studies relating faith to the outcome variables of life satisfaction, happiness, or positive affect reviewed by Koenig et al. (2001), 83 % indicated that faith predicted greater well-being over time. In this section, we highlight studies that have examined the relationship between faith and emotional well-being with multiple data points including both short- and long-term longitudinal designs.

#### **2.3.4.1 Short-Term Longitudinal Designs**

The benefits of faith for emotional well-being have been demonstrated with short-term longitudinal designs across age groups, countries, and ethnicities. For example, among a sample of 183 adolescents in Portugal, self-rated importance of spirituality was predictive of greater life satisfaction 1 year later, even when controlling previous levels of life satisfaction (Marques, Lopez, & Mitchell, 2013). Furthermore, spirituality was predictive of greater life satisfaction beyond the effects of adolescents' disposition to engage in hopeful thinking. In the U.S., a large study of 14,527 students at 136 institutions indicated that engaging in religious activities is

associated with greater gains in emotional well-being during the college years (Bowman & Small, 2012). Among older adults, an assessment of 1,024 individuals in the U.S. indicated that those who grew in trust-based prayer beliefs experienced increases in life satisfaction over a 3-year period (Krause & Hayward, 2013). Trust-based prayer beliefs involve the expectation that God knows the best way to answer a prayer and that He selects the best time to provide an answer. Thus, research has indicated that faith behaviors and beliefs predict greater emotional well-being over time. To strengthen the notion that faith contributes to greater well-being rather than that well-being contributes to greater faith, a study of a national probability sample of 10,008 U.S. adults assessed at two time points examined the causal order of the relationship between religious service attendance and happiness. The analyses indicated that religious service attendance had a greater effect on happiness than happiness had on religious attendance (Childs, 2010).

A substantial body of research has indicated that faith may longitudinally contribute to positive emotions in part through the process of coping with stressors. In a longitudinal study of 309 patients undergoing major cardiac surgery, importance of religion and religious involvement contributed to positive religious coping, which in turn was related to the experience of more hope (Ai, Park, Huang, Rodgers, & Tice, 2007). A follow-up study of 262 of these individuals indicated that preoperative use of positive religious coping predicted post-traumatic growth 30 months after surgery, even after controlling mental health and key demographic, medical, and protective factors (Ai, Hall, Pargament, & Tice, 2013). Similarly, Tix and Frazier (1998) found that religious coping measured 3 months after kidney transplant surgery was predictive of greater life satisfaction a year after surgery for patients ( $n = 239$ ) and their significant others ( $n = 179$ ). This link was not attributable to the effects of secular forms of coping such as cognitive restructuring, social support, and perceived control. Parallel results have also been found among individuals with cancer. Among a sample of 418 breast cancer patients, the degree to which patients indicated that they drew strength and comfort from their religious and spiritual beliefs was predictive of increases in post-traumatic growth 6 and 12 months later (Yanez et al., 2009). Similarly, among 165 cancer survivors, an increase in drawing strength and comfort from their religious and spiritual beliefs was predictive of reporting more positive life changes resulting from the experience of cancer (Yanez et al., 2009). These studies illustrate that faith might provide a pathway to growth when faced with illness.

The longitudinal benefits of religious coping have been demonstrated for other life stressors as well. For example, positive religious coping at the time of a divorce has been associated with greater posttraumatic growth 1 year later (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011). In addition, rating religion and spirituality as important for coping with general life stress among African American youth with few resources was associated with greater optimism and feeling more valued by others 2 years later (Spencer, Fegley, & Harpalani, 2003).

Prati and Pietrantonio's (2009) meta-analysis provides further insight into directionality of religious coping predicting change in post-traumatic growth over time, because a respectable amount of the research included in their analysis was

longitudinal. While drawing causal inferences remains a core challenge, there were no significant differences between estimates derived from longitudinal versus cross-sectional studies in the meta-analysis, suggesting that religious coping might function as a true predictor of post-traumatic growth. Stronger links would be expected in cross-sectional studies compared to longitudinal studies if religious coping were a correlate rather than a determinant of post-traumatic growth. Therefore, finding no difference between the two methodologies strengthens confidence in religious coping being an active agent in post-traumatic growth.

### 2.3.4.2 Long-Term Longitudinal Designs

As noted, research with short-term longitudinal designs suggests that faith relates to positive changes in emotions and well-being over time. We consider this point further by examining studies with long-term longitudinal designs that have followed individuals over decades or longer. The longest-running panel survey collecting data on life satisfaction has been conducted in Germany. An analysis of approximately 1,500 respondents annually reporting their religious attitudes and levels of life satisfaction over 16 years indicated that individuals who increased their religious activity over time experienced long-term gains in life satisfaction, while those who decreased their religious activity experienced long-term losses in life satisfaction (Headey, Schupp, Tucci, & Wagner, 2010). Though the effect size was not large, these findings are robust given that they controlled previous levels of life satisfaction and a host of demographic factors, including age, nationality, personality variables, education, relationship status, income, and physical health. Furthermore, follow-up analyses indicated that the link between religious activity and life satisfaction was maintained when taking into account unmeasured fixed effects, which involved factors associated with faith that were not specifically measured in the study, such as the benefits of being raised in a stable household. Thus, religious beliefs and activities seem to make a substantial difference in life satisfaction, even in a secularized country such as Germany.

Perhaps the most in-depth study of longitudinal data that involves a measure of religion and spirituality involves approximately 200 individuals from northern California who were followed from childhood to late adulthood through the Berkley Institute of Human Development (Dillon & Wink, 2007). The long-term follow-up in this study revealed that those who were higher in religiousness were more satisfied with their lives than others. For example, for those with poor physical health, religiousness acted as a buffer against negative emotions, making them equally happy and positive in outlook as their nonreligious counterparts with good physical health. This was not the case for those with poor physical health who were not religious.

Studies following individuals across the lifespan are particularly effective in shedding light on the frequently observed benefits of faith for those in old age. For example, higher levels of church attendance at age 47 have been shown to predict greater life satisfaction at age 70 among inner-city men in the U.S.

(Koenig & Vaillant, 2009). Church attendance in middle age accounted for 30 % of the variance in life satisfaction during older age, even after controlling the effects of prior mood and health status, social class, years of education, smoking, and alcohol use. Similarly, among both men and women, spirituality in middle adulthood, in the sense of placing importance on noninstitutionalized religion or non-traditional religious beliefs and practices, was significantly related to a greater sense of well-being from personal growth in late adulthood (Wink & Dillon, 2003). This sense of personal growth involved experiences of the self as growing, expanding, and continuing to develop, in contrast to having a sense of personal stagnation. In addition, religiousness in middle adulthood predicted better emotional health in late adulthood, even after taking into account the psychological well-being and physical health of the participants in middle adulthood (Dillon & Wink, 2007). The inclusion of these control variables indicates that faith is not merely a proxy for better physical or emotional health among those who were religiously engaged. In addition, links between religiousness and emotional well-being persisted after taking into account whether the participants had relatives and friends who provided them with social and emotional support. Thus, the benefits of religiosity did not seem to stem from social support. Furthermore, these lifetime studies suggest that the beneficial effects of religion on well-being in late adulthood are not a function of turning to religion to cope with adversity at the end of life, but rather result from the relatively stable patterns of religious engagement that were observed across adulthood among religious participants.

## **2.4 Faith Predictors of Positive Emotions and Well-Being Among Diverse Religious Samples**

Thus far we have reviewed findings from meta-analyses, literature reviews, and longitudinal studies, which predominantly show small to moderate positive relationships between faith and emotional well-being among Christian samples. There is some indication that the relationship between faith and well-being differs across Christian traditions (Tix, Dik, Johnson, & Steger, 2013), but much more insight is needed into how this relationship functions across different religions. While research linking faith to emotional well-being has been conducted among various age groups, countries, and ethnicities, the majority of the studies have focused on those in Western cultures and those affiliated with Christianity. Next, we briefly highlight some exceptions to this.

Second to Christians, the most research on faith and positive emotions seems to have been conducted among Muslim samples. For example, a few large studies have been conducted among Muslim men and women in Algeria. One such study indicated that that scoring higher on a scale of Islamic religiosity that tapped religious practice and religious altruism, showed small, positive links to personal satisfaction with various aspects of life, including optimism (Tiliouine, Cummins, & Davern, 2009).

In fact, links between religiosity and subjective well-being remained even after accounting for health conditions, physical pain, sleep problems, and anxiety. In another study, participants' satisfaction with religiosity and spirituality contributed to overall life satisfaction (Tiliouine, 2009).

A number of studies have been conducted among Muslim undergraduates in various countries. For example, among Iranian Muslim students, greater interest in religion, intrinsic religiosity, and extrinsic-personal religiosity were associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and happiness (Aghababaei, 2014). Each of these religious variables was assessed with a single item: "How interested are you in religion?" "My whole approach to life is based on my religion," and "What religion offers me most is comfort in times of trouble and sorrow," respectively. Links between these measures of religiosity and life satisfaction and happiness remained after controlling personality factors. When controlling personality factors, extrinsic-social religiosity (assessed with the item, "I go to the mosque or religious community mainly because I enjoy seeing people I know there") was also a predictor of life satisfaction, but not happiness. These findings indicate that religion is a unique predictor of well-being that cannot be accounted for by personality factors. In another study of Iranian Muslim college students, religion and spirituality were both predictors of greater psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and affect balance, with spirituality being the stronger predictor, contributing to well-being even after controlling the effects of religiosity (Joshloo, 2011). Similarly, among Muslim students in the U.K., both religiosity and spirituality were related to scores for personal meaning, sense of purpose, and sense of coherence in life (Aflakseir, 2012). Among this sample, taking part in religious activities was ranked the most important source of personal meaning. Finally, religiosity has also been associated with greater subjective wellbeing among Muslim Kuwaiti undergraduates (Abdel-Khalek, 2010).

In addition, some studies have been conducted among women only or have shown gender differences. For example, greater religiosity was associated with greater life satisfaction among Malay Muslim women (Noor, 2008) and religion was relevant to the well-being of female Muslim refugees from Somali in a small qualitative study from the U.K. (Whittaker, Hardy, Lewis, & Buchan, 2005). Furthermore, in a study of Muslim college students in Algeria, religiosity was associated with more happiness, life satisfaction, and optimism among women, but not men (Abdel-Khalek, & Naceur, 2007).

Research on the links between faith and emotional well-being become increasingly less common for other religious groups and regions of the world. However, one review of literature with focus groups indicated that religiousness and spirituality emerged as components of mental health and well-being in Asian culture (Vaingankar et al., 2012). In addition, a longitudinal study of spiritual engagement in the Hindu Thaipusam festival in Malaysia indicated that engaging in religious activities is associated with well-being in Eastern contexts, as has frequently been shown in Western countries (Mellor et al., 2012).

Some studies have included multiple religious groups. For example, among a religiously diverse group of individuals in Ghana, placing greater importance on

religion was associated with higher levels of subjective wellbeing (Pokimica, Addai, & Takyi, 2012). Similarly, among Jews and Arabs in Israel, religiosity was associated with greater life satisfaction (Van Praag, Romanov, & Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2010) and both religiosity and religious cognitions have been associated with higher levels of positive mood among Jewish and Christian participants (Loewenthal, MacLeod, Goldblatt, Lubitsh, & Valentine, 2000).

Finally, there is an empirical basis to suggest that religious coping has widespread relevance among many world religions and perhaps even secular societies (Pargament, 2011). Recent research has revealed many commonalities and also some distinctive forms of religious coping among Hindus (Tarakeshwar, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2003), Muslims (Abu Raiya, Pargament, Mahoney, & Stein, 2008; Khan & Watson, 2006), and Jews (Rosmarin, Pargament, Krumrei, & Flannelly, 2009). These studies reveal that the functions of religious coping, including gaining meaning, control, comfort, closeness with God, intimacy with others, and life transformation, have been shown to be largely similar across religions. Similar to Christian samples, greater use of positive religious coping strategies has been tied to better outcomes across religious groups (Abu Raiya et al., 2008; Khan & Watson, 2006; Loewenthal et al., 2000; Rosmarin et al., 2009; Tarakeshwar et al., 2003). Differences in religious coping among the major world religions lie primarily in the nature of particular coping techniques. Some forms of religious coping observed in Christian samples, such as religious forgiving, dissatisfaction with members in the religious community, and attributing stressful events to the Devil have not been seen among other religions (Tarakeshwar et al.). In addition, the essence of some forms of religious coping is unique for specific religious groups. For example, the religious coping strategy of looking for a stronger connection with a Higher Power may represent building a personal relationship with Christ for one individual, while it represents searching for the formless Brahman for another (Tarakeshwar et al.).

## **2.5 Possible Mechanisms for the Links Between Faith and Well-Being**

Researchers have considered many potential reasons for the relationship between faith and positive emotions, including that faith can meet well-documented psychological needs and desires in life, such as the need for social connection and support, self-transcendence, a sense of identity or self-concept, a sense of control, and a sense of meaning (Krause, 2011). Here, we briefly consider a number of possible reasons for the links between faith and well-being, including meaning, coping, control, and skills for regulating emotions and behaviors.

A characteristic of faith that relates particularly strongly to well-being is that it is involved in meaning making (for further discussion see Chap. 4). Park, Edmondson, and Hale-Smith (2013) have noted that faith is a functional way to satisfy the need

for meaning for many people in virtually every culture. Faith offers individuals a mental schema from which to interpret life events and experiences, thereby providing the cognitive mechanisms for organizing a coherent sense of meaning (e.g., James & Wells, 2003). In fact, Park et al. (2013) noted that faith seems to be uniquely capable of meeting the demands of meaning that arise from life's deepest questions and that individuals find it helpful, if not essential, for having a clear sense of the world and oneself. Faith systems are unique in that they go beyond naturalistic explanations to address existential questions in an emotionally satisfying way. Faith can offer a person a clear sense of self and of values that make life worth living (Koole, McCullough, Kuhl, & Roelofsma, 2010). In this way, faith can contribute to a person's conceptualization that he or she is a valuable member of a meaningful universe, leading to more self-esteem and life satisfaction. Thereby faith offers a sense of coherence, meaning, and purpose in life that leads to a positive emotional experience (George, Larson, Koenig, & McCullough, 2000; Poloma & Pendleton, 1990).

In addition to offering meaning on a global level, individuals can use their faith to create meaning out of adversity (Pargament, 1997). During difficult times, people can achieve a sense that a Higher Power is protecting them or that their suffering is part of a larger life plan and can experience feelings of comfort from a relationship with God. In these ways, people can experience hope and other positive emotions in the midst of emotional pain through their faith. Research indicates that faith provides unique coping strategies that are not redundant with secular methods. Thus, faith is a mechanism by which people do not merely survive adversity, but flourish and thrive emotionally through their active efforts to respond to challenges.

Faith can also offer individuals a sense of perceived control over their circumstances and a way to cope with anxiety, which are both associated with emotional well-being. When one's sense of personal control is threatened, being aligned with a Higher Power can bolster one's sense of control by creating the perception that one has a share in the Higher Power's control. In some life stages this has been associated with greater subjective well-being (Jackson & Bergeman, 2011). Faith also provides psychological security and hope for managing the anxieties of life and responding to fears about death (Koole et al., 2010; Soenke, Landau, & Greenberg, 2013). For example, a Canadian study provided physiological evidence that among believers in a theistic God, including Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist participants, both conscious and nonconscious primes of religion decreased the neural signal of error-related negativity during performance of a Stroop task (Inzlicht & Tullett, 2010). Error-related negativity is associated with defensive responses to errors. However, priming those who did not believe in God with religious concepts caused increases in error-related negativity. This seems to indicate that for those who believe in God, religion can buffer anxious reactions to stressful situations. In addition, religious beliefs, in comparison to secular worldviews, may be particularly helpful in coping with death anxiety, because they are all encompassing and offer beliefs in an afterlife (Vail et al., 2010). Managing death anxiety through faith is one way that individuals achieve higher levels of subjective well-being.



In addition to providing meaning on a variety of levels, faith may also relate to positive emotions because it offers skills that benefit the individual, such as the ability to self-regulate emotions and actions in harmony with both inner needs and environmental demands (Koole et al., 2010). As we will discuss in the next chapter, faith can foster the ability to adjust one's behavior in pursuit of desired goals and to override unhelpful behavioral tendencies, emotions, and behaviors that can impede reaching one's goals (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Much of this happens in an implicit, automatic fashion, as faith influences people's motivations and goals, reduces conflict among pursuits, and offers opportunities to monitor oneself and exercise self-regulation. This may take place, in part, by reducing self-focused attention and anxiety, thereby freeing individuals to experience enhanced mental control (James & Wells, 2003).

As such, faith may cultivate and activate cognitive mechanisms, emotional states, skills, motivation, and other psychological factors that increase positive emotions such as hope, optimism, gratitude, and well-being in people's lives. Some researchers have argued that the effects of faith can be reduced to other positive variables, such as social support or optimism. It should be reiterated that most research in this arena has made use of multivariate analyses in which potential confounding factors are controlled. The research literature supports both direct and mediated links between faith and emotional well-being, raising complex questions about the conceptualization of faith. Mediation models can explain away the effects of faith only if the qualities and functions assessed are considered external or tangential to faith. However, it may be that the mechanisms of faith described here are, in fact, essential to the core of what faith is, and that faith, therefore, cannot be separated from or reduced to various component functions. Furthermore, by drawing on supernatural agency, faith seems to offer distinctive forms of meaning, purpose, and coping that are not redundant with secular versions of these constructs (e.g., Paloutzian & Park, 2005; Pargament, 1997; Park et al., 2013; Vail et al., 2010).

## 2.6 Implications

While the relationship between faith and emotional well-being is complex and likely often bidirectional in nature, there is a research basis from which to conclude that faith is one avenue for nurturing positive emotional qualities. While faith is by no means the only avenue to positive emotions, numerous faith variables are associated with emotional health and well-being, including self-rated importance of religion and spirituality, religious and spiritual well-being, and religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors. When averaged across all studies in meta-analyses, the relationship is relatively small but consistent. Furthermore, a respectable amount of longitudinal research has been conducted indicating that faith variables precede emotional well-being in time, suggesting that faith may be exerting a causal effect on emotional well-being. These findings have significant implications for clinicians who work with both religious and nonreligious individuals.



### 2.6.1 *Clinical Implications*

The research reviewed in this chapter should be of interest to mental health professionals because of its clinical implications. In addition to research demonstrating links between faith and positive emotions and well-being, there is a large amount of empirical literature beyond the scope of this chapter that indicates that faith is also associated with decreases in negative emotions and mental health symptoms. Regardless, forms of therapy that focus specifically on positive emotions and adaptive coping without focusing on eliminating negative emotions are valuable in their own right (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). For example, positive psychology interventions, such as focusing on the positives in one's daily life, expressing gratitude, and focusing on implementing one's strengths, have resulted in increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms over time (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The research reviewed in this chapter suggests that faith is an additional avenue for increasing positive emotional experiences and well-being. Thus, it may be fruitful to incorporate an emphasis on faith within psychotherapy.

There is some evidence suggesting potential benefits of including an emphasis on faith within psychotherapy. Smith, Bartz, and Richards (2007), for example, examined 31 outcome studies of structured and non-structured spiritual therapies (71 % group psychotherapy, 26 % individual psychotherapy) for a range of clinical issues including depression, trauma, stress, anxiety, and eating disorders. The interventions made active use of religious interventions, such as prayer (42 %) and religious imagery or meditation (32 %). The meta-analysis revealed that spiritual approaches to psychotherapy were moderately effective in the treatment of psychological problems (effect size = 0.56). What is particularly noteworthy is that, among the smaller number of studies that used well-being as an outcome measure, the effect size of spiritually integrated treatments was large (0.96). Thus, it seems that spiritually based treatments can improve psychological well-being. Further clinical outcome research on the effects of these spiritual interventions is needed. Nevertheless, the current literature base suggests that psychotherapy clients could benefit from beginning or renewing spiritual practices.

In addition to empirical evidence that faith-related interventions are associated with positive emotional outcomes, there is evidence that clients desire to have religious and spiritual issues addressed by their clinicians (e.g., Pargament, 2007). Religious schema can affect mental health in a similar manner to other schemas concerning the self and one's environment; therefore, clinicians need improved understanding of the interrelationships between religious schema and mental health in order to incorporate spiritual dimensions into clinical practice (James & Wells, 2003). Individuals, for example, commonly attribute psychosocial and spiritual growth following a crisis to spiritual resources, such as having a loving relationship with God or obtaining support from fellow believers (Pargament, 2007). While many clinicians believe that spiritual interventions could help their clients, few have training in how to do so (Larimore, Parker, & Crowther, 2002).

Fortunately, professional associations and educational institutions are beginning to provide information on how to incorporate spirituality and practice (Larimore et al., 2002).

A few themes raised in this chapter can serve as a springboard for clinicians considering issues of faith in treatment. First, therapists can begin by understanding which aspects of faith are most conducive to psychological health. Meta-analyses indicate that among adults, clinicians may want to explore personal, internalized devotion, such as a client's intrinsic religious orientation and emotional attachment to God (Hackney & Sanders, 2003) and how clients find a sense of meaning and purpose through their orientation to the sacred (Sawatzky et al., 2005). Among adolescents, clinicians may want to focus on social and behavioral aspects of institutional religion and spirituality in addition to existential aspects of faith (Wong et al., 2006). Therapists may choose to guide clients toward an increased participation in those aspects of their spiritual lives that are most psychologically beneficial. Second, therapists may consider the potentially powerful role of faith-based emotions in clients' lives, such as spiritual gratitude, feeling loved by God, or extending loving-kindness toward others. In some instances it can be valuable to address clients' affective responses to God in therapy. For example, reassessing one's image of God can result in therapeutic change in a person's evaluation of him or herself and important others (Reinertsen, 1993). Finally, religious coping methods can be powerful avenues for facilitating long-range psychological and spiritual growth in response to trauma or stress. Drawing upon the client's faith framework can be particularly helpful in exploring big questions about life and existence that are raised by traumatic experiences. In addition, some religious coping tactics are particularly suited to people's attempts to achieve change (Pargament, 1997). For example, clients can draw on religious guidance to seek new direction in life. This may involve attending to an inner spiritual compass or listening to God through prayer.

Of course, the therapeutic approaches discussed here will be meaningful only if they fit within a client's individualized understanding and experience of the sacred. This chapter discusses a broad range of faith variables, including those that may be relevant to individuals who do not identify with a particular religious tradition. Clinicians should be sensitive to the fit of particular religious interventions for a given client. For example, loving-kindness meditation may benefit clients who are not comfortable with traditional prayer or vice versa.

### **2.6.2 A Cautionary Note**

Positive psychology as a discipline does not deny negative aspects of life. Rather, the emphasis is on the fact that what is good about life is as important as what is negative, and therefore deserves equal attention from psychologists. For this reason, the emphasis in this chapter has been on research that demonstrates links between faith and emotional well-being. As indicated by meta-analyses that take all

published studies into account, the overall relationship between faith and well-being is positive. However, it is important to consider that this composite effect is made up of studies with positive, negative, and null results. It should be noted that some longitudinal studies have found no links between faith and well-being (Atchley, 1997; Levin & Taylor, 1998; Markides, Levin, & Ray, 1987) or a negative link (Brown & Tierney, 2009). Indeed, while less common, there are some forms of faith that are associated with negative emotions and declines in well-being. This is one reason that the averaged links between faith and well-being tend to be small. Considering only the forms of faith that are positively associated with well-being would likely result in a stronger, positive relationship. Nevertheless, the fact that some faith experiences are associated with less well-being should not be overlooked. For example, while spiritually transformative experiences were associated with more positive feelings about religion, connection to God, religious strengthening, and changed understanding of the self and the world in comparison to experiences of profound beauty, they were also associated with more confusion, fear, pain, sadness, worry, and skepticism (Cohen, Gruber, & Keltner, 2010). Furthermore, in research parallel to the benefits of positive emotional experiences of God, discontent toward God is associated with psychological distress, hopelessness, depressive symptoms, and feelings of guilt (e.g., Braam et al., 2008; Eurelings-Bontekoe, Steeg, & Verschuur, 2005). Similarly, religious coping is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide array of both positive and negative religious responses to stress, including those that have been empirically linked to poorer emotional adjustment (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001). Negative forms of religious coping include activities such as passively waiting for God to solve a problem or becoming spiritually discontent. Such religious struggles have complex implications for people's lives including, depression, anxiety, and distress (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005), but are paradoxically also related to personal and spiritual growth (Exline & Rose, 2005; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005). Religious coping has diverse implications for people's well-being, depending on the "fit" between the stressor and the religious coping method employed (Pargament, 1997; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). Thus, in clinical settings, therapists should work with clients to find the right fit, paying particular attention to the fact that any therapeutic approach must be meaningful within a client's individualized understanding and experience of the sacred.

## 2.7 Directions for Future Research

A great deal of research has been conducted on the relationship between faith and positive emotional outcomes, consistently showing that faith is associated with higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, and subjective well-being. There is need to expand these lines of investigation to include more diverse outcome measures more frequently, including love, joy, gratitude, serenity, contentment, optimism, hope, pride, inspiration, awe, confidence, empathy, and

social-connectedness. This is particularly true given that not all religions value the same emotional outcomes and that particular emotions may be understood differently across religions (Tsai et al., 2013). It seems that some of the currently frequently assessed emotions, such as happiness, may be more appropriate measures of emotional well-being in Christian samples than among other religions (Tsai et al., 2013), which is consistent with the fact that most research in this area has been conducted among Christian participants.

Therefore, along with the need for more diversity in outcome measures, there is a need for greater diversity among research participants. Current research has included participants from various age groups, countries, and ethnicities; however, the majority of the studies have focused on Christians within Western countries. Clearly additional studies are needed to examine the role of faith in emotional well-being across a greater diversity of cultures and religions. In addition, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Mela et al., 2008; and the studies reviewed in the Clinical Implications section of this chapter), the majority of research on the relationship between faith and well-being has been conducted within the general population. It would be beneficial to assess more clinical populations regarding how faith relates to well-being. While empirical research is leading in the direction of establishing spiritually based treatments as efficacious for improving psychological well-being, further controlled clinical trials that consider diverse populations are needed to establish the effects of these spiritual interventions.

Methodologically, the research literature relating faith to positive emotions poses numerous strengths. While some studies have made use of faith measures with items confounded with emotional well-being, many research designs have avoided this problem and controlled for a host of potentially confounding variables. In addition, longitudinal designs have been able to display how changes take place over time. Next steps in research methodology should include moving beyond self-report measures to multiple methods of assessment, including behavioral measures, observer reports, and physiological measures. The research literature can also be strengthened by the use of more experimental designs, such as controlled clinical trials focusing on the benefits of various faith practices. While it is clear from the research literature that many people in the general population reap emotional benefits from faith, controlled clinical trials would provide more information about when and how to best employ faith practices in clinical interventions.

As we move forward, there is room to focus research on explicitly religious or spiritual emotions. Investigation is needed to examine when and how emotions take on a religious or spiritual nature and what the implications are for emotional health and well-being. To date, little is known about whether spiritual emotions offer distinct benefits from general emotions. Finally, there is a need for more research on the substantive components of faith (e.g., beliefs, practices, experiences) that contribute to positive emotions and well-being most directly, and the specific ways in which they do so.

## 2.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter we reviewed research on the relationship between faith and positive emotions. First, we considered how emotions relate to religion and how emotions can take on a religious or spiritual nature. Research indicates that there are differences in the types and intensity of emotions experienced based on whether individuals are religious or not, as well as the particular religion to which they belong. One potential reason for religious differences in the types of emotions experienced is that different religions place emphasis and value on different emotions. The relationship between faith and emotions is complex and bidirectional, with faith relating to emotional experiences as well as emotional experiences relating to faith.

Within the psychology literature, some emotions have been labeled as religious or spiritual in nature. These include emotions such as gratitude, compassion, empathy, humility, contentment, love, adoration, reverence, awe, elevation, hope, forgiveness, tolerance, loving-kindness, responsibility, contrition, joy, peace, trust, duty, obligation, and protectiveness. This raises complex questions about whether emotions exist in sacred as well as secular forms. Psychologists have taken a variety of approaches to conceptualizing how key emotions relate to faith. We proposed three avenues through which it is possible to study faith-based emotions and provided examples from empirical literature for each. These included operationalizing emotions in an explicitly faith-based way, assessing emotions that are experienced related to a Higher Power, and examining emotions evoked by religious practices. Very little research has examined whether faith-based emotions are distinguishable from secular emotions in their positive outcomes.

Next, we examined how various faith variables relate to positive emotion outcome variables, paying particular attention to meta-analyses, longitudinal research, and studies among diverse religions. Although a great deal of research has indicated that faith relates to decreases in negative emotions, we took a positive psychology approach by focusing on links between faith and increases in positive emotions. The empirical literature has focused nearly exclusively on the outcome variables of happiness, life satisfaction, and subjective well-being. While faith is by no means the only avenue to positive emotions, the research literature indicates that numerous faith variables are associated with emotional health and well-being, including self-rated importance of religion and spirituality, religious and spiritual well-being, and religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors. When averaged across all studies in meta-analyses, the relationship between faith and positive emotions is relatively small but consistent. Furthermore, these findings remain after controlling for many demographic factors as well as non-religious resources. In addition, a respectable amount of longitudinal research indicates that faith variables precede emotional well-being in time, suggesting that faith may be exerting a causal effect on emotional well-being. There is some indication that age, race and gender moderate the relationship between faith and emotional well-being, but more research is needed in this area. While the vast majority of research has been

conducted among Christian samples in Western cultures, the research available among individuals of other religions seems to mirror the findings of research with Christian samples.

While it seems that faith cannot easily be explained away on the basis of secular phenomena, faith may relate to positive emotional outcomes because it helps people to meet well-documented psychological needs and desires in life. We summarized a number of possible links between faith and emotional well-being, including that faith provides a sense of meaning, a way to cope with adversity, a sense of control, and skills relevant for regulating emotions and behaviors.

The research reviewed in this chapter should be of interest to mental health professionals because of its clinical implications. There is some evidence suggesting clinical benefits to including an emphasis on faith within psychotherapy and that clients desire to have religious and spiritual issues addressed by their clinicians. Of course, therapeutic approaches will be meaningful only if they fit within a client's individualized understanding and experience of the sacred.

In this chapter, we reviewed a great deal of research has been conducted on the relationship between faith and positive emotional outcomes. There is need to expand these lines of investigation to assess more diverse positive emotions as well as more diverse participants. Methodologically, the research literature poses numerous strengths, but we provided some suggestions for future improvement to methodology. In addition, as we move forward, there is a need for more research on the substantive components of faith (e.g., beliefs, practices, experiences) that contribute to positive emotions and well-being most directly, and the specific ways in which they do so.

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## Chapter 3

# Faith and Behavior

The major world religions emphasize the importance not only of beliefs, but also of various behaviors and actions. As noted in Chap. 1, one dimension of the definition of religion is the consequential dimension – the secular effects of religious belief, practice, experience, and knowledge – or the manifestation of religious commitment in the day-to-day life of the religious believer (Stark & Glock, 1968). A number of areas of study that are of interest to social scientists have examined the relationship of religious faith to behaviors and the practical outcomes manifested in living out one’s life as a person of faith. For example, numerous studies have indicated that religious commitment is associated with more prosocial behavior and lower rates of behavior and activities that put health at risk (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012; Rew & Wong, 2006; Saroglou, 2012, 2013). Prosocial behaviors are important to the field of positive psychology because they promote a life of engagement and meaning and thus contribute not only to optimal human functioning but to the greater good of society. The study of health behaviors is also central to positive psychology as they contribute directly to physical health as part of optimal human functioning.

This chapter will begin with a review of the empirical research on the relationship between faith and various prosocial behaviors including altruism/helping behavior, forgiveness, and ethical and moral choices. Next, we review the empirical literature focusing on various health-risk behaviors including alcohol consumption and sexual behavior. We will also describe mechanisms that have been proposed to explain the link between faith and behaviors in order to further understanding about how faith might promote beneficial behaviors. We end the chapter by discussing implications for the field of psychology and suggestions for future research. Toward the end of the chapter, we also provide a cautionary note about the potential negative impact of some faith variables on behavioral outcomes.

As noted in previous chapters, operational definitions of faith and spirituality vary dramatically across studies. This is also the case with regard to research examining the impact of faith and spirituality on behavior. Scholars have defined these constructs in myriad ways that are similar to definitions discussed in previous



chapters including attendance at religious services, belief in God, and personal religious commitment. Researchers studying the relationship between faith and behavior, however, have also attempted to identify various religious orientations as well as capture the multidimensionality of the constructs of religion and spirituality. Some research, for example, has used Allport and Ross's (1967) concept of religious orientation which originally distinguished between an *intrinsic* religious orientation in which religion is central to one's motivations in life, and an *extrinsic* religious orientation in which religion is a means to acquire security, status, and other self-serving motivations. Batson (1976) later identified a third type of religious orientation which he labeled *quest*, in which religion is less doctrinal or dogmatic and more of a process of spiritual development that involves questioning and doubting. Others have focused on the multidimensional nature of various religious orientations or religious and spiritual constructs by measuring various dimensions within them (Huber & MacDonald, 2012; Messay, Dixon, & Rye, 2012). Researchers have also differed in terms of the outcome measures they have used to examine the various behaviors addressed in this chapter. Much of the research on altruism and forgiveness, for example, focuses on behavioral dispositions or intentions (e.g., one's tendency to help/forgive across situations or self-reported intention to help/forgive) rather than overt behavior per se. Throughout this chapter we will describe the unique operational definitions of faith used by researchers as well as the behavioral outcome variables that relate to faith.

### 3.1 Faith and Prosocial Behaviors

Within the field of psychology, prosocial behavior, broadly defined, includes any positive, helpful, constructive behavior that is intended to benefit society by promoting social acceptance and relations. We use a broad definition of prosocial behavior to include not only helping behavior, but other prosocial behaviors such as forgiveness, sharing, generosity, and morality and ethical behavior. There is a clear link between the promotion of such prosocial behaviors and the doctrines of all the world religions. The Christian New Testament, for example, promotes love and kindness toward others, goodness, and forgiveness (Galatians 5:22; Matthew 6:12, 22:39, 25:31–46). The Ahadeeth of Islam, which includes the teachings of Mohammed, also promotes prosocial behaviors such as charitable behaviors toward the deaf, the blind, and feeble as well as forgiveness (Donahue & Nielsen, 2005; Rye et al., 2000). In the Buddhist tradition, practices such as forbearance and loving-kindness meditation are encouraged to cultivate kindness and care of oneself and others (Higgins, 2001; Shapiro & Sahgal, 2012). A review of the world religions by Slattery and Park (2011) also suggested that prosocial behaviors such as altruism, forgiveness, and ethical behaviors are associated with various world religions such as Hinduism and Judaism.

Within the field of psychology, the notion that faith leads to prosocial behaviors has been referred to as the 'religious prosociality hypothesis' (Galen, 2012, p. 876).



The body of research examining this link has been hotly debated in recent years (see Galen, 2012; Myers, 2012; Saroglou, 2012). In the sections that follow, we summarize the empirical research literature that examines the relationship between faith and various prosocial behaviors focusing specifically on altruism and helping others, forgiveness, and morality and ethical behavior.

### ***3.1.1 Altruism and Helping***

History is replete with examples associating faith and altruism or helping behavior. Social psychologists generally define altruism as the desire to help others without expectation of reward, recognition, or reciprocation. Many religiously convicted figures throughout history are famous for their altruistic behavior such as Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu, and the Dalai Lama. In addition, altruism has been noted as a significant construct in the teachings of most of the world religions (Beit-Hallami & Argyle, 1997; McFadden, 1999; Neusner & Chilton, 2005). Indeed, because altruism has been so consistently and widely linked within the empirical literature on spiritual awareness or awakening as part of religious practice, it is seen as a core component of self-transcendence and spirituality (Huber & MacDonald, 2012).

The study of altruism became a popular topic of research among psychologists in the late 1960s and continues to garner the interest of researchers today. The history of research on the topic of altruism was recently reviewed by Midlarsky, Mullin, and Barkin (2012) who described the variable ways that altruism has been viewed over time. Initially, altruism was broadly defined and equated with simply engaging in acts that benefit others. Over time, however, researchers became interested in examining the motives behind altruistic acts as either other-oriented (altruism) or self-oriented (egoistic). The question has been whether or not pure, or selfless, altruism is even possible given the many potential self-oriented motives for engaging in helping behavior, such as relieving one's own distress at seeing another in need, reducing guilt feelings, etc. The two most common altruistic motivations that have been proposed are feelings of empathy for the person in need and maturity of moral judgment, both of which have been consistently identified as predictors of altruistic behavior (Midlarsky et al., 2012). However, whether or not researchers can practically distinguish between altruistic and egoistic motivations when one engages in helping behavior has been a matter of considerable debate, even to the extent that some question whether a dichotomous distinction is even necessary. The construct of altruism, therefore, can be viewed as existing along a continuum from low to high as well as pluralistically with multiple motivations existing simultaneously (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Midlarsky et al., 2012).

Research specific to the relationship between faith and altruism, in contrast, has been relatively limited (Midlarsky et al., 2012), although also the subject of much debate. According to Batson and his colleagues, a review of the empirical literature up to 1993, led them to conclude that not only do religious people show no

more active concern for those in need than do people who are less religious, but that religious individuals only *present themselves* as more concerned (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993). More recently, Midlarsky and colleagues concluded that “research on the relationship between altruism and religion has been limited and largely inconclusive” (p. 139). In contrast, others have concluded that the majority of studies show a pattern of weak, but consistently positive relationships between faith and helping people in need (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). A recent review by Saroglou (2012, 2013) concluded:

Religious prosociality is not a myth. The partial discrepancy, in religious people, between self-perceptions as being prosocial and real behavior seems to reflect complex underlying psychological processes rather than simple moral hypocrisy (as suspected in the past). Prosociality exists – not only in religious people’s minds – as an important key part of religious people’s personality and related aspirations, values, moral principles, and emotions. (p. 450)

Based on the empirical literature, we agree with Saroglou’s analysis about the faith-altruism connection – that is, that faith contributes to altruistic behavior – and that the relationship is complicated and requires questions about why and how these constructs are linked under various circumstances. The research in this area has primarily defined altruism as a behavioral disposition or trait or as a behavioral intention, and less frequently as a specific behavior. In addition, the faith-altruism link has traditionally been examined in correlational studies, but has recently been the subject of experimental research.

Much research has examined the self-perceptions of religious and nonreligious individuals about their degree of altruism and helping behavior. For example, the Gallup Polls have assessed the relationship between religion and helping and have consistently found that those who are highly spiritually committed are more likely than those who are highly uncommitted to be currently working to serve the elderly, poor, and needy (Colasanto, 1989; Gallup, 1984). In the 1984 Gallup survey, for example, among Americans who were ‘highly spiritually committed,’ 46 % voluntarily helped infirm and poor people in comparison to the 22 % who were rated as ‘highly uncommitted.’ These patterns have been replicated in several subsequent Gallup surveys conducted more recently (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999; Wuthnow, 1994). In addition, another large scale telephone survey conducted with over 4,000 U.S. adults found that 54 % of those who attended religious services volunteered in contrast to 32 % of non-attenders (Westat, 2001). Research with college students shows that religiosity is positively correlated with propensity to volunteer (Ozorak, 2003). Finally, faith-based organizations also provide services to people in need through a variety of avenues, including volunteerism (Maton, Domingo, & Westin, 2013; Maton & Pargament, 1987; Maton & Wells, 1995) as discussed in detail in Chap. 6, which addresses faith in community settings. Research examining volunteer behavior outside of the U.S. is consistent with these findings. The World Values Survey included data from 53 countries and found that religious service attendance predicted higher rates of volunteering among individuals active in both religious as well as secular organizations (Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006, 2010).

Individuals' reports of contributing financially to various organizations and charities can also be seen as a form of helping behavior. Gallup surveys indicate that those who attend religious services on a weekly basis give significantly more money to charity than those who never attend religious services (Gallup, 1984; Gallup & Lindsay, 1999). Some have argued that donations by religious individuals are nothing more than "club membership fees" associated with being a member of a congregation (Argyle, 2000). However, when those in a U.S. sample who gave time and/or money to religious groups were compared with those involved solely in secular charitable activities, those who contributed to religious groups were also more generous in giving to secular charities and volunteer efforts, even after controlling for economic resources (Westat, 2001). In an extensive review of studies on charitable donations, Bekkers and Wiepking (2007) found that church attendance and religious affiliation were associated with both religious and nonreligious giving. Although most of these studies include largely Christian populations, other studies have indicated that religious attendance is associated with increased donations among Eastern religions in Asia (Chang, 2006).

In addition, religious individuals tend to self-report that they value various attributes associated with altruism such as benevolence (Saroglou, Delpierre, & Cernelle, 2004), care and justice (Graham & Haidt, 2010), and also report high feelings of empathy and compassion (Markstrom, Huey, Stiles, & Krause, 2010; Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005; Smith, 2009). Such values are typical of religiosity among individuals representing various world religions such as Christians, Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims (Francis, 2009; Saroglou, 2010; Saroglou et al., 2004). Not only do religious individuals self-report high levels of attributes and values associated with altruism, but they are also perceived as high in these constructs by different informants including parents, teachers, siblings, friends, and colleagues (Saroglou, 2010). In addition, experimental evidence is beginning to appear which indicates that altruistic behavior tendencies can be impacted by priming procedures using positive religious words and images (Ahmed & Salas, 2011; Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007; Pichon & Saroglou, 2009; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). In one study, for example, subliminal exposure to religious words increased participants' willingness to help for both religious and nonreligious individuals (Pichon et al., 2007).

There is some research, however, that suggests that although people of faith are more likely to help others, their willingness to help can be mediated by various contextual factors (Duriez, 2004; Saroglou, 2012, 2013; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). One such contextual factor is the target of the altruism. In a number of studies, researchers have presented hypothetical situations that varied targets based on proximity or familiarity (Blogowska & Saroglou, 2011; Saroglou et al., 2005). In one study, religiosity was positively related to willingness to help acquaintances and relatives, but unrelated to helping strangers among a group of Belgian students (Saroglou et al., 2005). Similar findings were obtained with a group of Polish students (Blogowska & Saroglou, 2011). These studies examined behavioral intentions, but other studies examining actual behavior have also found similar results. Blogowska, Lambert, and Saroglou (2012), for example, found that students

who were more religious were more likely to help a student with a project by committing 30 minutes to completing a questionnaire than less religious students.

Another important consideration in studying variations in the research findings associated with the faith-altruism link is the disparate definitions of faith that have been employed. Research, for example, has examined the way in which different targets relate to altruism depending on the way in which faith is defined in various studies. Saroglou et al. (2005), for example, found a difference in the type of target for altruism when faith definitions were considered. In this study, when religiousness was isolated from spirituality, people high on religiousness engaged in helping behaviors toward loved ones but not strangers, whereas those high on spirituality showed helping behaviors toward both loved ones and strangers. In another study, Huber and MacDonald (2012) considered the impact of the multidimensional nature of faith on helping behavior by examining the relations between altruism, empathy, and spirituality in a sample of 186 university students, while controlling for age, sex, and social desirability. These researchers used the Expressions of Spirituality Inventory to assess faith which is a self-report measure that assesses five dimensions of spirituality including cognitive orientation toward spirituality (e.g., nonreligious beliefs about the nature and importance of spirituality), existential well-being (e.g., one's sense of meaning, purpose, and ability to cope with adversity), spiritual experience (e.g., being "deeply connected to everything"), paranormal beliefs (e.g., communicating with the dead), and religiousness (e.g., intrinsic religious orientation and religious behavior such as meditation). In this study, altruism was measured by a self-report inventory that asked participants to rate the degree to which they engaged in various helping behaviors, which could be motivated either by egoism or empathy. Findings indicated that empathy was significantly positively related to spiritual cognitions, religiousness, and spiritual experiences while altruism was most strongly linked to spiritual experiences, followed by spiritual cognitions. Regression analyses revealed that spiritual cognitions and spiritual experiences were the most potent predictors of both empathy and altruism. The authors concluded that the way in which people think about spirituality rather than religiousness per se, may be more strongly related to empathy and altruism. A study conducted by Duriez (2004) confirmed both the importance of faith definitions and the role of cognitions in helping behavior when he found that religiousness was unrelated to empathy but the manner in which religious content was mentally processed and interpreted was important. Symbolical interpretations of the Bible, for example, were linked to higher levels of empathy than literal interpretations.

Other studies have found a significant impact of various dimensions of faith such as religious orthodoxy, fundamentalism, and religion as quest on individuals' willingness to engage in helping behaviors. In one of the few studies on faith and altruism to use an experimental procedure, Pichon and Saroglou (2009) examined the impact of religious activation (using a priming procedure that included positive religious elements) on helping behavior of individuals holding various religious attitudes (e.g., orthodoxy) toward a homeless person (an in-group or proximal target) and an illegal immigrant (an out-group or distant target). Findings indicated

that activation of a religious context increased participants' intentions to help people in need, but only for the homeless (proximal) target, a finding consistent with the aforementioned research suggesting that people of faith are more likely to help familiar people. In addition, individuals in this study who held orthodox religious beliefs (e.g., literal religious thinking) were found to be less willing to help homeless or illegal immigrant targets than those holding other religious attitudes. The orthodox religious people in this study tended to consider the targets responsible for their problems, an association partially mediated by the belief in a just world for others. Other studies have found that fundamentalists are less likely to help unemployed people who are gay or single mothers (Jackson & Esses, 1997). Although this finding is true of religious fundamentalists it is also sometimes true of those who endorse more mainstream intrinsic religious views. Several studies have found that intrinsically religious people show a willingness to help only those who share their values and are less willing to help those who threaten their values such as people from other religions, homosexuals, women, foreign people, and nonreligious people (Batson, Anderson, & Collins, 2005; Batson, Floyd, Meyer, & Winner, 1999; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). In contrast, studies conducted by Batson and colleagues on quest orientation demonstrate that religious individuals who score high on quest orientation are not less likely to help individuals who violate norms or who are intolerant (e.g., gay individuals, fundamentalists) unless helping involves actually participating in activities that *promote intolerance* (Batson, Denton, & Vollmecke, 2008; Batson, Eidelman, Higley, & Russell, 2001; Batson et al., 1999; Batson et al., 1993).

Taken together, these findings provide several insights into the nature of the faith-helping connection. First, these studies suggest that a connection between faith and helping exists, with people of faith being somewhat more likely to be helpful than their nonreligious counterparts. However, contextual factors are important and may contribute to findings of weak or modest relationships between faith and helping behavior because helping behavior appears not to be unconditional, a phenomenon referred to as the *limited prosociality view* (Nielsen, Hatton, & Donahue, 2013, p. 320). Many people of faith, for example, help under circumstances in which the target of the helping behavior is familiar. This may be due to the fact that people of faith value interpersonal relationships, social approval, and in-group versus out-group affiliation (Saroglou, 2012, 2013). Second, people of certain religious orientations, such as orthodoxy and fundamentalism, are particularly less likely to engage in helping behavior when the targets are unfamiliar or hold values that are inconsistent with their own. This may be due to the fact that religious people are less likely to help when the person in need exhibits behavior that violates a religious standard (Jackson & Esses, 1997). Another possibility is that although religions generally value benevolence, or attention to the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent contact, the same is not true of the principle of universalism, which includes attention to the welfare of all people and of nature (Pichon & Saroglou, 2009). It is also clear that the methods used to operationalize faith impacts the various findings associated with the faith-helping connection and thus should continue to be examined in future research.

Finally, although the majority of research supports a link between altruism and faith, those who are nonreligious or antireligious also engage in altruistic behavior (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). One doesn't necessarily need to have a personal faith or be part of a faith community to engage in helping behavior, but people of faith are somewhat more helpful and giving in terms of volunteering, charitable donations, and helping behavior within certain contextual parameters.

### ***3.1.2 Forgiveness***

Forgiveness is another prosocial behavior that is given prominence and promoted by most, if not all, religions of the world. Indeed, McCullough, Bono, and Root (2005) have described forgiveness as a universal religious concern. Since the 1980s, social science research on the construct of forgiveness in general has grown significantly (McCullough et al., 2005). Research on the relationship between faith and forgiveness has also grown, particularly within the past decade. A PsycINFO search for articles containing the subject terms 'religion' and 'forgiveness' for the years 1980–2002 yielded 25 results whereas the same subject search for the years 2003–2013 yielded 76 results.

Although the construct of forgiveness appears to be an important universal concern, there is not universal agreement on how the construct should be operationally defined. Everett Worthington, perhaps the most prominent psychological researcher on forgiveness, and his colleagues, have defined forgiveness broadly as "a victim's reduction of negative thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviors toward an offender, as well as the promotion of positive thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviors toward an offender" (Worthington et al., 2012, p. 64). Worthington and colleagues (2007) have further delineated two types of forgiveness including decisional forgiveness and emotional forgiveness. Emotional forgiveness refers to the development of positive feelings toward the offender while decisional forgiveness refers to a victim's decision to forgive an offender which in turn leads to behaviorally based efforts to reduce negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors while promoting positive aspects of the same. Such definitional distinctions are important because different religions differ in the degree to which they emphasize decisional versus emotional forgiveness (Worthington et al., 2013) which may in turn impact the relationship between faith and forgiveness.

The faith- forgiveness connection has been studied using a variety of methods. Forgiveness, for example, has been measured as both a behavioral disposition to forgive – a trait, as well as a behavioral state. The former has been referred to as forgivingness and the latter has been referred to as state forgiveness or forgiveness of specific offenses (Worthington et al., 2012, 2013). In addition, research on faith and forgiveness has included various objects of forgiveness including transgressors, one's self, and God (McCullough et al., 2005; Worthington et al., 2012). In this section we focus on self-reported importance of faith to forgiveness as well as specific behavioral forms of forgiveness such as dispositional tendencies toward

forgiveness, self-reported forgiveness of typical or hypothetical transgressions, and forgiveness in response to real-life transgressions. In addition, we focus on forgiveness of the transgressor, rather than of one's self or of God, because of its direct relevance to promoting prosocial behavior.

### 3.1.2.1 Self-Reported Importance of Forgiveness

In terms of the relationship between faith and its self-reported importance to forgiveness, research indicates a strong link. In a Gallup poll of a nationally representative sample, for example, 84 % of respondents endorsed the statement "because of my faith, I have forgiven people who have hurt me deeply" (Winseman, 2002). According to another large, nationally representative survey conducted within the U.S., over 80 % of U. S. adults feel that their religious beliefs "often" help them to forgive others (Davis & Smith, 1999). In addition, Wuthnow (2000) found that the majority of U.S. adults in his nationally representative sample of individuals who were involved in a religiously-oriented small group, such as a Bible study or prayer group, reported that the group helped them to forgive someone.

### 3.1.2.2 Forgiveness as a Trait and State

The large majority of studies examining faith and forgiveness have focused on forgiveness as a trait or an individual's tendency to forgive others across a variety of relationships and situations. These studies, by and large, have found a positive relationship between faith and forgivingness. According to a recent review by McCullough and colleagues (2005), across a wide range of studies conducted over the past three decades, "people with high levels of religious participation, religious salience, or religious commitment tend to be more forgiving than are their less religious counterparts" (p. 399). These outcomes are consistent across a variety of religions including Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions (Azar & Mullet, 2002; Cohen, Malka, Rozin, & Cherfas, 2006). In contrast, studies which have measured forgiveness as a state via self-reported forgiveness to real-life transgressions have often failed to find a faith-forgiveness relationship. For example, in several recent studies participants' religiosity turned out to be unrelated to behavioral forgiveness when measured as low retaliation to a specific offense (Greer, Berman, Varan, Bobrycki, & Watson, 2005; Leach, Berman, & Eubanks, 2008; Saroglou, Corneille, & Van Cappellen, 2009).

Several possible explanations for what researchers refer to as the religion-forgiveness discrepancy between dispositional and state measures of forgiveness and faith outcomes have been offered by McCullough and Worthington (1999). One possible explanation is that religious individuals are not actually more forgiving under real-life circumstances, but report being more forgiving because such behavior is valued in their religious communities. Another possibility is that such individuals only appear to be unforgiving in real-life circumstances because



when recalling transgressions, individuals are likely to recall those that have not yet been forgiven. A final possibility has to do with the ways in which faith and forgiveness are measured. This final explanation has been examined by several researchers who have teased out varying methods of measuring the constructs of faith and forgiveness.

Tsang et al. (2005), for example, hypothesized that the discrepancy among trait and state studies may be due to the use of single measures of forgiveness behavior rather than an aggregate of forgiveness behaviors. Their hypothesis was supported by finding positive correlations between religiosity and transgression-specific offenses. Other researchers have examined the consistency between faith and forgiveness measures in using state or trait approaches. In a meta-analysis examining this question, Davis, Worthington, and Hook (2011) found that correlations between faith and forgiveness were similar when measuring forgiveness as either a state or trait in relation to trait measures of faith (.14 and .19, respectively), but when both faith and forgiveness were measured as states, the correlation increased significantly (.33).

Other research has focused on measuring specific dimensions of various religious orientations. Gordon et al. (2008) found that religious orientation was associated with a measure of state forgiveness with intrinsic religiousness associated with a greater likelihood of having forgiven an interpersonal offense while extrinsic religiousness was associated with more revenge-seeking. Others have studied a third religious orientation – quest – which is characterized by an open-minded, less dogmatic approach to faith and includes recognition that faith represents a spiritual journey that includes wrestling with questions and doubts. Sandage and Williamson (2010), for example, found quest religious orientation to be negatively related to dispositional forgiveness. Messay and colleagues (2012) also studied quest, along with its many dimensions, in relation to both dispositional and state forgiveness. Results among their sample of 242 undergraduates attending a Catholic university indicated that certain dimensions of quest were better predictors of forgiveness than others, and associations depended on the way forgiveness was measured. In particular, the dimensions of Exploration (efforts devoted to examining religious teachings) and Moralistic Interpretation (focus on the message behind biblical teachings rather than the literal interpretation) were better positive predictors of dispositional and state forgiveness, respectively. The dimensions of Change (openness to change and examination of religious beliefs), Religious Angst (feelings of religious doubt), and Existential Motives (linking one's religion to questions of meaning and purpose), in contrast, were each negatively correlated with both state and dispositional forgiveness suggesting that these forms of religiousness may limit one's ability to forgive.

Overall, these findings suggest that research outcomes examining the relationship between faith and forgiveness are mixed and the nature of the faith-forgiveness relationship depends on the ways in which both faith and forgiveness are measured. Measures of forgiveness that assess one's general tendency to forgive across multiple situations and relationships tend to be positively associated with faith, and in particular, intrinsic faith orientations. In addition, specific quest dimensions



are associated with dispositional forgiveness such as efforts devoted to examining religious teachings. In contrast, findings related to measures of forgiveness that assess one's ability to forgive specific self-identified offenses demonstrate more mixed findings with some studies demonstrating a positive association between faith and forgiveness and others demonstrating a negative association. Again, specific quest dimensions are associated with state forgiveness such as the tendency to focus on the message behind biblical teachings rather than the literal interpretation. There is preliminary evidence, however, suggesting that other quest dimensions are associated with less forgiveness, whether measured as a state or trait, such as openness to change and examination of religious beliefs, feelings of religious doubt, and linking one's religion to questions of meaning and purpose. Additional research and theory are needed to understand the complex relationships between different aspects of faith and forgiveness as well as the complexities inherent in their relationship to each other.

Some authors have speculated on why religion might promote forgiveness, as well as offered more complex reasoning about the relationship between faith and forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2005; Tsang et al., 2005; Worthington et al., 2012, 2013). Some have suggested, for example, that faith promotes forgiveness because of various characteristics of faith communities, such as the value placed on the construct of forgiveness within faith communities and the encouragement of emotions such as compassion and empathy within such communities (Tsai, Koopmann-Holm, Miyazaki, & Ochs, 2013; Tsang et al., 2005). As noted at the beginning of this section, most, if not all, religious traditions value forgiveness. In terms of fostering empathy, Huber and MacDonald (2012) found in a sample of 186 students at a Catholic-affiliated university that empathy was positively correlated with measures of spiritual cognitions, spiritual experiences, intrinsic religious orientation, and religious behavior, even after controlling for age, gender, and social desirability. Many faith traditions also include religious scriptures and traditions that promote forgiveness as well as provide exemplars of forgiveness behaviors (Worthington et al., 2013).

Worthington et al. (2012) recently proposed a model to explain the complex reasoning about the relationship between faith and forgiveness. In their model they highlight the importance of understanding various characteristics of the sacred from the victim's perspective, the victim's perceptions of the relationship between the sacred and both the victim and transgressor, and the relationship that exists between the sacred and the transgression from the victim's perspective. In terms of the victim's perceptions of the sacred, according to the model various understandings can influence the likelihood of forgiveness. According to Worthington and colleagues various views of God, such as viewing God as either just or merciful, as well as various understandings of what a particular faith requires regarding forgiveness, can impact forgiveness-related views and behavior. Some religions, for example, condone revenge and retributive justice under specific circumstances and thus religious beliefs can sometimes be used as justification for not forgiving a transgressor (McCullough et al., 2005; Tsang et al., 2005), or in extreme cases committing violent revenge. As a partial test of this idea, Tsang et al. (2005) attempted to

examine whether individuals who were unforgiving toward a specific transgressor were using their faith beliefs to rationalize their stance. These researchers found that individuals who were unforgiving of their transgressors (e.g., motivated to avoid their transgressors) were less likely to endorse forgiveness Scripture, whereas individuals who were forgiving were more likely to endorse forgiveness Scripture as well as somewhat less likely to endorse retribution Scripture. In addition, they found that avoidance motivations were negatively correlated with forgiving images of God. Taken together, these findings suggest that a person's Scriptural beliefs as well as their image of the sacred, can impact willingness to forgive.

In their model, Worthington and colleagues also suggested that the relationship between both the victim and the sacred and the transgressor and the sacred, from the victim's perspective, could potentially impact the likelihood of forgiveness. For example, the victim's connection to God or the similarity of faith between the victim and transgressor could impact the likelihood of forgiveness. Finally, their model also includes the importance of understanding the relationship between the sacred and the transgression, such as whether the transgression is viewed as a desecration of something sacred such as transgressions affecting marriage or sexuality. There is some empirical evidence to support these additional aspects of the model. In one study, for example, Davis, Hook, and Worthington (2008) found evidence for the importance of the victim-sacred relationship to forgiveness as positive attachment to God was related to higher likelihood of forgiveness. There is also evidence of the importance of similarity between the victim and transgressor in terms of spirituality, group identity, and values of tolerance and open-mindedness (Davis et al., 2009; Messay et al., 2012; Wohl & Branscombe, 2005; Wohl, Branscombe, & Reysen, 2010). Evidence of the importance of the transgression-sacred relationship has also been observed in studies suggesting that sacred loss and desecration (e.g., a marital affair that leads to divorce) predicted more hurt and less forgiveness (Davis et al., 2008; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). In addition, the sacred-transgression connection seems to be important in terms of various religious doctrines as they relate to forgiveness. For example, some offenses are unforgivable as determined by Jewish and Christian faiths (Cohen, Malka, Rozin, & Cherfas, 2006) whereas for others, such as Muslims, offender apology and repentance are important (Mullet & Azar, 2009).

### ***3.1.3 Morality and Ethical Behavior***

One of the key pillars within positive psychology focuses on the study of virtues, which lead to living an engaged and meaningful life – or living the ‘good life.’ As noted in Chap. 1, Peterson and Seligman identified “six core moral virtues that emerge consistently across cultures and throughout time” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 28). Of particular relevance to this section are the character strengths that relate directly to moral and ethical behavior including the strengths of justice, fairness, integrity, and honesty (Park, Peterson, Seligman, 2006). These virtues

are consistent with many of those promoted within all of the world religions, which offer principles and guidance in living a moral and ethical life (Hood et al., 2009). As an example, the Ten Commandments, supported by both the Christian and Jewish tradition, provide a set of ethical and moral guidelines for people of faith. These guidelines promote behaving with integrity and responsibility in addition to avoiding various behaviors such as killing, lying, and stealing. As noted by Hood and colleagues, many would argue that “religion has tremendous potential to improve our world by teaching an ethical system that would benefit all of us” (p. 381). As discussed in Chap. 1, others such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens hold the opposite view and consider religious faith harmful. From a positive psychology perspective, however, we are interested in examining whether faith promotes ethical behavior and whether it operates to inhibit unethical behavior. In this section we review the empirical research which addresses this question of whether faith is related to ethical and moral behavior by examining research related to the promotion of honesty and the inhibition of crime and delinquency.

### 3.1.3.1 Honesty

One ethical virtue associated with many world religions is that of integrity, or engaging in authentic and honest behavior. Some social science researchers have attempted to empirically investigate the relationship between honesty and faith, although very few published studies exist. A PsycINFO search for articles published in the past 30 years using the search terms ‘faith’ or ‘religion,’ with ‘honesty,’ or ‘dishonesty’ yielded less than 20 articles. Early studies focused on academically dishonest behavior, such as plagiarism or cheating on exams, among religious high school and college students and found that the majority of students engaged in some form of academic dishonesty (e.g., Spilka & Loffredo, 1982). In a more recent study, Bruggeman and Hart (1996) examined high school students who attended either a religious or a public school. Students were presented with two tasks on which they had an incentive to cheat and/or lie. Group comparisons revealed similar levels of cheating and lying as 70 % of religious school students versus 79 % of the public school students cheated and/or lied. The meaning of these results is unclear, however, because religious school affiliation was the dependent variable rather than the personal religious behaviors and attitudes of the participants.

Other research has examined the relationship specifically between personal religiousness and cheating using self-report measures. In one study, Grasmick, Bursik, and Cochran (1991) investigated the relationship between religion and self-reported admission of how likely respondents would be to cheat on their income taxes in the future. These researchers found that religious persons were less likely to indicate that they would cheat on their taxes. More recent studies have found similar findings by examining tax fraud (acceptability of tax fraud or willingness to cheat on taxes) using very large samples of approximately 35,000–45,000 adults who participated in the World Values Survey, which included data

from more than 30 different countries (Stack & Kposowa, 2006; Torgler, 2006). In both of these studies, acceptability or willingness to cheat on one's taxes was inversely related to a number of faith variables such as religious affiliation, religious attendance and participation, religious education, religious identity or salience, strength/comfort derived from religion, and trust in a church. In addition, these researchers controlled for a variety of variables such as demographics (e.g., age, education, occupation, etc.) social bonds, risk aversion, and economic strain or loss. Interestingly, in one of these studies, Stack and Kposowa (2006) also examined country-level religious characteristics, such as percentage of persons affiliated with a religion, and found that countries with more than 50 % religious affiliates were 27 times more likely to have a significant inverse relationship between frequency of church attendance and tax fraud acceptability. In another study, researchers examined religious orientation and found that higher intrinsic religious scores were inversely related to reports of academic dishonesty (Storch & Storch, 2001). Furthermore, Huelsman, Piroch, and Wasieleski (2006) studied a convenience sample of 70 undergraduates who completed the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire and a measure of academic dishonesty and found that while religiosity and academic dishonesty were not significantly correlated among the entire sample, a significant association between faith and academic dishonesty was observed for women. Although these studies primarily demonstrate a small to moderate positive association between faith and the virtue of honesty, since prosocial behaviors like honesty are very socially desirable, particularly among people of faith, it is difficult to interpret either high self-ratings of honesty (Perrin, 2000) or high correlations between honesty and faith variables.

In an effort to overcome the biases inherent in self-report studies of honest behavior, several researchers have used overt behavioral measures. Studies examining religiousness and cheating behavior have primarily relied on samples of grade school children or college undergraduates and have yielded mixed findings. Early research conducted in the 1920s with grade school children using various tests for cheating (e.g., changing answers after grading their own tests) found no relationship between religion and cheating behavior (Hartshorne & May, 1928, 1929). A more recent study using various behavioral measures with sixth graders from religious schools in Israel also found a similar lack of association between faith and cheating (Smith, Wheeler, & Diener, 1975). Studies of college students using behavioral outcome measures have also failed to find a faith-honesty connection. In a recent study, Williamson and Assadi (2005) studied academic dishonesty in a sample of 65 undergraduate students who were monitored for cheating on a computerized version of the Graduate Record Exam under various experimental conditions. These researchers found that participants' religious orientation, including intrinsic and extrinsic, was not related to their tendency to cheat. Similarly, Shariff and Norenzayan (2011) examined the relationship between cheating behavior in an anonymous setting and overall levels of religious devotion and belief in God in two studies of undergraduates and found no relationship between these faith measures and cheating behavior.

In contrast, two additional studies which also used behavioral outcome measures of cheating found significant relationships with religiosity, albeit small effects. Perrin (2000) found that college students reporting greater levels of religiosity (e.g., church attendance, religious activities, belief in life after death, etc.) were more likely to be honest when presented with the opportunity to cheat on a class assignment on four of the seven measures of religiosity obtained in this study. Interestingly, some of the strongest effects were found for external acts of religious practice such as church attendance, while more internal aspects of religiosity such as prayer and religious experience, were not significantly related to cheating behavior. Perrin (2000) concluded that even though statistically significant relationships were observed on most measures, and the results for all measures suggested that religious students were more honest than nonreligious students, the results still indicated that the majority of religious students were not honest. In one of the only experimental studies to date that examined religiosity and cheating, Randolph-Seng and Nielsen (2007) examined the effect of religious priming and religious orientation on a cheating task in two different studies of undergraduates. In the first study, participants implicitly primed with religious words cheated significantly less on a subsequent task compared to participants in the control conditions. Similar results were obtained in a second study with subliminal presentations of religious words, with those receiving the religious prime being less likely to cheat than those receiving the non-religious prime, although in this second study, participants' scores on intrinsic religiosity had no influence on rates of cheating behavior.

In conclusion, the relatively few studies that have examined the relationship between faith and honesty include mixed findings. Many studies have found that religious respondents are often less likely to cheat or engage in deception compared to their nonreligious peers. This is particularly true for studies that use personal measures of faith (e.g., self-identified faith behaviors or religiosity as a trait versus religious school attendance) and self-report measures of honesty, although two studies using behavioral outcome measures of honesty also found some evidence for the faith-honesty link. Most of the studies indicating no faith-honesty connection, whether based on self-report or behavioral measures, were conducted with children or high school or college students, which limit their generalizability and may produce developmentally specific outcomes. Most studies, for example, examined dishonesty as some form of cheating in these populations where such behaviors are somewhat normative. Indeed, research suggests that academic dishonesty is quite common, with 83 % of college students in one study admitting at least one act of academic dishonesty such as plagiarism (Cochran, Chamlin, Wood, & Sellers, 1999).

The mixed findings of research studies examining the faith-honesty connection are no doubt due to the inconsistency across studies in terms of the operational definitions of faith and honesty that are used, the populations that are studied, and the lack of attention to controlling potentially confounding variables, which all contribute to the difficulty in interpreting findings. Most studies on faith and honesty, for example, treat religion in a relatively unsophisticated way and do not control for potential confounding variables such as sex or ethnicity of participants.

One exception is the research mentioned above by Shariff and Norenzayan (2011). Although these researchers found that overall levels of religious devotion and belief in God were not associated with cheating behavior, when the researchers examined specific beliefs about God, as either a loving and compassionate, or as an angry and punishing agent, faith and cheating were related. Findings indicated that specific beliefs did predict cheating as a more punishing, less loving God was reliably associated with lower levels of cheating. The researchers found that this relationship remained even after controlling for relevant personality dimensions, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and gender. Another potential problem with current research is the potential confound between study design and age of participants, as most of the self-report studies finding significant faith-honesty connections were conducted with older individuals, while the behavioral outcome studies finding no significant faith-honesty link were conducted with students. It may be that the level of faith and moral maturity of participants are impacting these outcomes. Indeed, in one study that examined faith and cheating among students attending religious and public schools, researchers found no significant differences between groups on moral reasoning ability and moral reasoning was not correlated with cheating behavior (Bruggeman & Hart, 1996).

### 3.1.3.2 Crime and Delinquency

Another area of behavior that social scientists study which is directly related to ethics and morality is behavior that is illegal and/or violates the rights of others. The inhibition of such behaviors has been theoretically linked to religion by Durkheim (1947) who defined religion as a unifying set of beliefs that unite people into a socially and morally integrated community. Therefore, one behavioral consequence of faith should be conformity to social norms or a lack of crime and delinquency among people of faith.

There is a long history of research examining the role of faith in potentially inhibiting crime. In a meta-analysis of research from 1967 to 1998 published on the topic, Baier and Wright (2001) examined 60 studies and found that none of the correlations (a total of 79 effect sizes were included) were positive, indicating that “religious behavior and beliefs exert a significant, moderate deterrent effect on individuals’ criminal behavior” (p. 14). In another review of the research literature for the *Handbook of Religion and Health* Koenig et al. (2012) identified 39 studies on faith and antisocial behaviors, delinquency, or crime published prior to 2000. They concluded that approximately 80 % of the studies reviewed found lower rates of these behaviors in individuals who were more religiously involved. Taken together, these reviews suggest that faith may serve as a deterrent to crime and delinquency. The large majority of studies conducted prior to 2000, however, are cross-sectional and correlational and therefore could not definitively address whether religion serves to inhibit such behavior or if those who engage in such behavior are less inclined to be religiously involved.

Since 2000, several high quality longitudinal research studies have been conducted that examine the link between faith and various criminal and delinquent measures. A number of studies have analyzed data from the Add Health longitudinal study, which examined the impact of religiosity on delinquency in large samples of students and parents (ranging from 7767 to 11, 046 participants) on a variety of faith and delinquency outcome measures. Regnerus (2003a), for example, examined adolescent religious attendance and “born again” status on various delinquent acts (e.g., theft and minor delinquency such as property damage, lying, and fighting) performed during a 12-month follow-up. After controlling for various demographic, school, and family factors, an inverse relationship between adolescent individual religiosity and delinquent activities was found. In particular, religious attendance was significantly related to lower rates of theft and minor forms of delinquency. Religious identity as “born again” status was only weakly related to theft and was unrelated to minor delinquency. In a second report, Regnerus (2003b) described an analysis of the relationship between parental religiosity (e.g., church attendance, prayer, and religious salience) and adolescent delinquency (e.g., various acts ranging from painting graffiti to theft to using a weapon). After controlling for adolescent religiosity, adolescent satisfaction with family life, and adolescent autonomy, parental religiosity at baseline was inversely related to adolescent delinquent behaviors at the 12-month follow-up. Examining potential sex differences revealed that the positive effect of parental religiosity on delinquency was present for female adolescents, but not males. In this study, parental religious identity was also assessed and categorized as conservative Protestant (defined as Baptist, Assemblies of God, Pentecostal, Adventist, and Holiness) or not. Findings revealed that parents’ conservative Protestant affiliation displayed a consistent negative direct effect on delinquency. Other studies examining the Add Health data have found similar results over time including an inverse relationship between religiosity and delinquency in low-risk adolescents and between both maternal and adolescent religiosity on delinquency (Pearce & Haynie, 2004; Regnerus & Elder, 2003).

In summary, there is strong evidence that faith is inversely related to criminal and delinquent behavior. Longitudinal data suggest that faith serves to inhibit criminal and delinquent behaviors, at least in the short-term as the follow-up in most longitudinal studies was 12 months. In a recent review of the research literature since 2000 by Koenig et al. (2012), the authors concluded that the findings were nearly identical to their review of studies published prior to 2000 in that approximately 80 % of studies found an inverse relationship between faith and delinquency/crime. Although much of this research has been conducted with U.S. samples, studies are beginning to appear from other countries, yielding similar findings (Baier & Wright, 2001; Barber, 2001; Stack & Kposowa, 2006; Torgler, 2006). In addition, although most of the studies described above include youth, studies with adults also suggest that faith is associated with reduced recidivism among male prisoners (Benda, Toombs, & Peacock, 2003). Although the majority of studies show a negative relationship between faith and delinquency and crime, the relationships tend to be modest. In addition, the evidence seems to suggest that victimless crimes, such as gambling, are more likely to be deterred by religion than



other crimes and the deterrent effect of religion seems to increase when individuals are immersed within a religious community (Baier & Wright, 2001; Stark, 1996; Stark, Kent, & Doyle, 1982). This may be due to the social costs of arrest and incarceration associated with participating in a religious community. Although a relationship is clear, it is not clear which aspects of faith involvement are most protective against crime and delinquency. However, evidence suggests that religious upbringing and religious activity during youth serve as protective factors by directing youth away from peer groups, attitudes, and behaviors that put them at risk (Koenig et al., 2012). While one does not necessarily need to have a personal faith or be engaged in a faith community to act in moral and ethical ways, as noted by Plante (2012), “there are few secular forums that can offer the guidance, fellowship, support, models, and engagement that the religious institutions offer” or “the organizational structure that religion offers” (p. 87, 88).

## 3.2 Health-Related Behaviors

Harold Koenig published his seminal volume, *Is Religion Good for Your Health?* nearly two decades ago. Since that time, there has been a proliferation of research examining the link between faith and physical health outcomes. Most evidence supports the notion that involvement in religion in some form is associated with better physical health (Koenig, 1997; Koenig et al., 2012). Although an extensive review of the research examining the links between religion and physical health is beyond the scope of this book, of relevance is the fact that many have speculated about the possible mechanisms through which religion positively impacts health (Compton & Hoffman, 2012; Gall et al., 2005; George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002). George and colleagues, for example, outlined several potential mechanisms through which faith helps promote health including encouragement of various health practices and behaviors. In this section we focus on the relationship between faith and both the enhancement of health-promoting behaviors as well as the reduction of potential health-risk behaviors.

There is considerable research suggesting that health-related behaviors are significant in explaining the relationship between various aspects of faith and positive health outcomes; this is true in both cross-sectional as well as longitudinal studies (George et al., 2002). For example, health behaviors were found to partially explain the effects of church attendance on mortality in several longitudinal studies spanning 3–28 years (Hummer, Rogers, Nam, & Ellison, 1999; Oman & Reed, 1998; Strawbridge, Cohen, Shema, & Kaplan, 1997). In this section, we first describe the research literature linking health-promoting behaviors to faith such as exercise and diet. Next we discuss the relationship between various potential health-risk behaviors and faith, with a particular emphasis on two specific potential health-risk behaviors that have been the topic of extensive research within the field: alcohol and drug use and sexual behavior. Our review of the literature on faith and health-related behaviors will demonstrate that faith can promote or motivate health-related behaviors that lead to positive health outcomes.



### ***3.2.1 Faith, Health-Promoting, and Potential Risk Behaviors***

George and colleagues (2002) proposed two reasons why faith might increase the likelihood of health-promoting behaviors and decrease the likelihood of potential health-risk behaviors. The first reason is that many faith traditions explicitly proscribe good health habits. As an example, the Mormon religion specifically prohibits various behaviors that could possibly be detrimental to health such as alcohol consumption, smoking, and sex outside of marriage. In addition, the Mormon faith encourages health-promoting behaviors by providing guidelines for diet, sleep, and time spent with family. Other faith traditions have similar prohibitions against specific detrimental behaviors such as conservative or evangelical Protestants, Seventh Day Adventists, and Black Muslims (Ellison, Barrett, & Moulton, 2008; George et al., 2002). The second reason is that many faith traditions adhere to the notion that the body should be taken care of, respected, and treated as a “temple.” There is considerable evidence that individuals within religious denominations that have explicit proscriptions for health behaviors (e.g., Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons) have better health outcomes than individuals in other religious denominations and this relationship is partially explained by their health-risk and health-promotion behaviors (Gardner, Sanborn, & Slattery, 1995; Phillips, Kuzma, Benson, & Lotz, 1980).

#### **3.2.1.1 Health-Promoting Behaviors**

Given that many faiths prescribe good health habits and view the body as sacred, researchers have examined various potential health-promoting behaviors and their relationship to faith with the ultimate goal of improving physical health outcomes. In a recent review of adolescent health behaviors and their relationship to faith, Rew and Wong (2006) found only a few studies in the research literature that focused on health-promoting behaviors, rather than health-risk behaviors. Those studies that have included attention to health-promoting behaviors have focused on how faith relates to birth control, virginity pledges, personal safety, seat-belt use, diet, exercise, and sleep. In a recent study of 364 college students, conducted by Nagel and Sgooutas-Emch (2007) these researchers examined a number of religious and spiritual variables and their relationship to a variety of health-promoting behaviors. Results indicated that students high in spirituality were more likely to be more physically active and exercise more often than students low in spirituality. In addition, they found that students who attended church more than once a week reported exercising more and consuming less caffeine compared to students who reported attending church less than once a week. In a study conducted by Park and colleagues (2009) researchers examined the link between faith and health behaviors in a sample of 167 young adults who had survived some type of cancer. These researchers examined the relationship between various health behaviors and church attendance and spiritual experiences. Their results indicated that church attendance

had little impact on health behaviors, but that daily spiritual experiences were related to greater performance of health behaviors including diet, exercise, and adherence to doctor's advice. These findings highlight the importance of examining the faith-health behavior link to include broad conceptual frameworks of faith that include not just religious behavior, but also cognitive and emotional aspects of faith beliefs and experiences. As the authors of this study note, daily spiritual experiences appear to provide some motivation to take better care of oneself, which may ultimately impact physical health outcomes in a positive way.

Additional studies have found positive links between faith and health behaviors such as eating a healthy diet, exercising, engaging in preventive medical screenings, and adhering to medical recommendations (e.g., Benjamins, Trinitapoli, & Ellison, 2006; Holt, Haire-Joshu, Lukwago, Lewellyn, & Kreuter, 2005; Holt, Lewellyn, & Rathweg, 2005; Park et al., 2009; Strawbridge, Shema, Cohen, & Kaplan, 2001; Wallace & Forman, 1998). These relationships have been found consistently among samples of college students, the elderly, and the general community and across a variety of faith measures assessing religious activities, spiritual experiences, and faith beliefs.

### 3.2.1.2 Alcohol and Drug Use

Religious teachings about alcohol and drug use vary across different traditions with some groups opposing the use and/or abuse of alcohol and drugs, while others express more tolerance. Some faith traditions (e.g., Christianity, Judaism), for example, are tolerant toward *moderate* drinking and may even incorporate its use into various celebrations and sacraments (Ellison et al., 2008; Koenig et al., 2012). Opposition to the *excessive* use of alcohol, however, has a long tradition in the Christian faith, which has equated excessive drinking with sin because it might either hinder personal faith or lead to a range of harmful or sinful behaviors such as sexual misconduct, violence, etc. (Ellison et al., 2008; Koenig et al., 2012). Other world religions also have proscriptions against the use of alcohol and other drugs such as Islam, which forbids such activity (Akabaliev & Dimitrov, 1997). Because of such proscriptions on excessive drinking and drug use and because many religious communities promote the idea of "moderation" in all things, researchers have hypothesized a negative relationship between faith and drug and alcohol use.

Literally hundreds of studies have been published relating faith variables to alcohol and drug use and all but a very few report an inverse relationship – that is, that higher levels of faith and religiosity are associated with less drug and alcohol consumption. Astin (1993), for example, found that religiosity was a strong negative predictor of the "hedonistic" student in that religiosity was negatively correlated with alcohol consumption, smoking, and "partying." Mooney (2010) also found that religious students spent less time "partying" than nonreligious students. Bell, Wechsler, and Johnston (1997) found that students for whom religion was "not very important" were three times more likely to use marijuana than those for whom religion was "very important." Other studies have examined

the relationship between alcohol and drug use and faith among adult samples and found similar results. Strawbridge and colleagues (2001), for example, prospectively followed a random sample of 2,676 community-dwelling adults in California from 1965 to 1994 and found that those who were heavy drinkers at baseline and attended religious services at least weekly were more than four times more likely to stop drinking heavily during the 28-year follow-up compared to those attending less than weekly.

Although many of the examples of studies cited above rely on U.S. samples, similar findings have been documented across countries and cultures. Studies have found an inverse relationship between faith and alcohol/drug abuse in Canada (Hundleby, 1987), China (Wu, Detels, Zhang, & Duan, 1996), Australia (Najman, Williams, Keeping, Morrison, & Anderson, 1988), and various countries in Europe (e.g., Spain: Grana Gomes & Munoz-Rivas, 2000; Sweden: Pettersson, 1991), Africa (Nigeria: Adelkekan, Abiodun, Imouokhome-Obayan, Oni, & Ogunremi, 1993), Asia (Thailand: Assanangkornchai, Conigrave, & Saunders, 2002), and the Middle East (Israel: Kandel & Sudit, 1982). In addition, most of the examples cited above focus on alcohol consumption but similar findings linking faith with lower levels of drug use have been demonstrated for marijuana (Brown, Schulenberg, Bachman, O'Malley, & Johnston, 2001; Nonnemaker, McNeely, & Blum, 2003), ecstasy (Strote, Lee, & Wechsler, 2002), and methamphetamine (Herman-Stahl, Krebs, Kroutil, & Heller, 2006).

In the most recent edition of the *Handbook of Religion and Health*, Koenig and his colleagues (2012) reviewed the recent literature on the relationship between faith and alcohol/drug use. In terms of alcohol use or abuse, they found that 86 % of studies investigating the faith-alcohol connection reported less alcohol use/abuse among more religious individuals. In terms of drug use or abuse, they found that 84 % of studies investigating the faith-drug connection reported less drug use/abuse among more religious individuals. Koenig and colleagues concluded that:

Many studies suggest that R/S [religion and spirituality] involvement is a protective against alcohol and drug abuse. This finding has been observed in adolescents and adults, and in countries throughout the world. The relationship is not mediated by social support and appears to be independent of other confounders. The association cannot be explained by familial or peer influence. (p. 241).

In response to the strong research history and link between faith and alcohol and drug use, researchers have begun to examine potential mediators of this relationship. In a longitudinal study of 7th–10th graders, for example, Wills, Yaeger, and Sandy (2003) found that religiosity buffered the effects of life stress on substance use and thus provided protection against the use of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana. Faith might also serve to decrease substance use by providing a source of meaning and life purpose and therefore reduce motivations to use alcohol as a coping mechanism (Drerup, Johnson, & Bindl, 2011; Johnson, Sheets, & Kristeller, 2008). Other potential mediators have included beliefs or attitudes about substances (Bachman et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2008) and various social influences such as perceived norms, peer modeling, and being offered substances (Burkett, 1993; Johnson et al., 2008). Others have suggested that the effect of faith on substance

use is mediated through personal self-regulation and self-control (Murray, Goggin, & Malcarne, 2006; Walker, Ainett, Wills, & Mendoza, 2007), which will be discussed further in the next section of this chapter.

In summary, decades of research examining the relationship between faith and alcohol and drug use indicate that faith is an important negative predictor of such use, especially among individuals who are actively involved in religious activities. Most studies have defined faith in terms of religious attendance with frequency of prayer, belief in a supernatural being, religious salience, and religious denomination also being common. Indeed, with few exceptions, research on links between faith and substance use has focused on external forms of faith rather than on spirituality and its various dimensions or religious orientation. One exception is a study conducted by Nagel and Sgoutas-Emch (2007) in which the researchers assessed religious attendance as well as spirituality, which focused on spiritual experiences and feelings of closeness to God. Results indicated that although religious attendance was inversely related to alcohol consumption, spirituality was not related to alcohol consumption. Future research should incorporate alternative methods of assessing faith in order to enhance understanding about the faith-alcohol/drug link. More research is needed to clarify the specific aspects of faith that impact the relationship between faith and substance use.

### 3.2.1.3 Sexual Behavior

Historically, religious teaching and doctrine has identified the role of sexuality as being for procreative purposes within the context of a marital relationship (Hood et al., 2009). As a result, most of the research examining the relationship between faith and sexual behavior has focused on premarital and extramarital sex. In one nationally representative sample, Cochran and Beeghley (1991) examined a subset of 15,000 respondents from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) surveys conducted between 1971 and 1989, and found a strong correlation between religious commitment and belief that extramarital sex is wrong. Conservative religious denominations were more likely to condemn extramarital intercourse than were mainline religious denominations, and Jews reported the least condemnation. Janus and Janus (1993) in a survey of more than 2,700 U.S. adults found that religious people were less likely to report having had extramarital affairs than were nonreligious people. However, adults who self-identified as “religious” were less likely to have had affairs (26 %) than adults who self-identified as “very religious” (31 %). Although difficult to explain, this difference may have less to do with degree of religiosity and more to do with other confounding variables such as religious orientation or personality. Studies, for example, have found that permissive attitudes toward sex, as well as sexual experiences, were negatively linked to intrinsic religiosity and positively linked to extrinsic religiosity (Haerich, 1992). These findings suggest that greater commitment to religious institutions (intrinsic orientation) is associated with decreased permissiveness and sexual experience, while increases of these variables are associated with greater commitment to personal comfort and security (extrinsic orientation).

Similar inverse patterns between faith and sexual behavior have been found in studies examining self-reports of engagement in premarital sex. In their review, Benson, Donahue, and Erickson (1989) concluded that there is a strong constraining effect of religion on the likelihood of engaging in premarital intercourse. Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007) found that three forms of religious decline – religious practice, religious salience, and disaffiliation from religion – correlated with engaging in premarital sex among college-aged students. A number of other studies have also confirmed that various measures of religiosity are related to decreased premarital sexual activity among both adolescent and adult samples (e.g., Barkan, 2006; Holder et al., 2000; Zaleski & Schiaffino, 2000).

Other research has focused on the relationship between faith and sexual risk behaviors, such as engaging in unprotected sex and having multiple sexual partners. Poulson, Eppler, Satterwhite, Wuensch, and Bass (1998) examined relationships among alcohol use, strength of religious convictions, and unsafe sexual practices (e.g. inconsistent use of condoms; having multiple sexual partners) in 210 undergraduates. Findings indicated that women with strong religious beliefs consumed less alcohol and were less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior than were female participants with weaker religious convictions. Among men, religious conviction was not significantly correlated with either alcohol consumption or risky sexual behavior.

Overall, these findings lend significant support to a link between faith and less engagement in and/or acceptance of premarital and extramarital sex. Research is also beginning to appear that examines the relationship between faith and sexual risk behaviors. However, the evidence to date is mixed and shows that links with faith are more likely for females compared to males. Additional research is needed to examine more diverse definitions of faith, a greater variety of sexual behaviors, and more methodologically sophisticated research to determine the mechanisms that might underlie the relationship between faith and sexual behavior. Such information could be helpful not only to therapists who work with couples, but also to health educators focusing on sexual behavior. Indeed, some research suggests that more religious youth tend to be less knowledgeable about sexual issues (Crosby & Yarber, 2001) and so attention to the relationship between faith and sexual behavior could prove quite valuable.

### 3.3 Potential Mechanisms of Behavior Outcomes

There have been several potential mechanisms proposed to help explain why faith is related to beneficial behavioral outcomes. It is important to identify the various mechanisms through which faith affects behavioral outcomes because such understanding has considerable practical value. Identifying the specific mechanisms of faith that promote optimal human functioning such as forgiveness, empathy, altruism, honesty, ethics, and health-promoting behaviors can lead to greater understanding about how to enhance and facilitate the development of these virtues.

Such understanding can then be translated into various interventions and practices that might benefit people of faith as well as those who proclaim no faith beliefs. In this section we review four potential mechanisms that have most frequently been discussed in the research literature in an effort to explain why faith promotes prosocial and health-related behaviors including social control theory, self-regulation and self-control, social learning theory, and positive emotion.

### ***3.3.1 Social Control Theory***

Social Control Theory provides one possible explanation through which to explain the associations between faith and various prosocial and health-related behaviors. Social Control Theory suggests that religion serves a social control function that establishes various norms and values that favor personal restraint. The theory suggests that individuals behave in certain proscriptive ways because religious institutions and traditions exert various controls, via norms and values, which maintain social order by discouraging various socially deviant and self-destructive behaviors (Stark, 1996).

There is some evidence to support the Social Control Theory, particularly as it relates to faith and both sexual behavior and alcohol/drug use. In one study, for example, researchers examined data from 1972 to 1989 from the U. S. National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey, which involved nearly 15,000 individuals (Cochran & Beeghley, 1991). In this survey, the researchers asked respondents about attitudes toward nonmarital sexuality by asking them to rate the 'wrongness' of various behaviors. Findings were consistent with the studies reviewed in this chapter indicating that religious individuals disapproved more strongly of premarital sexuality, extramarital sexuality, and homosexuality compared to less religious individuals. In addition, and relevant to Social Control Theory, the authors noted variations across different religious groups such that the more strongly one's religious reference group condemned and prohibited various sexual acts, the more likely individuals were to agree that a particular behavior was 'wrong.' Cochran and Beeghley (1991) concluded "That is, as religious proscriptiveness increases, the effect of religiosity on nonmarital sexual permissiveness increases" (p. 46). Other research has found similar support for religion's normative influence on other behaviors such as drug and alcohol use (Cochran, 1993; Ford & Kadushin, 2002). Additional research is needed to examine the possible role of normative influence on both ethical behavior as well as prosocial behaviors.

### ***3.3.2 Self-Control and Self-Regulation***

Some have argued that faith operates at the level of the individual to develop the virtue of temperance, or self-control. Many of the world religions emphasize

self-control as a virtue including Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism (Pearce & Wachholtz, 2012). In addition, there is research suggesting that self-control and self-regulation can lead to positive physical, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Self-control has been defined as “the internal resources available to inhibit, override, or alter responses that may arise as a result of physiological processes, habit, learning, or the press of the situation” (Schmeichel & Baumeister, 2004, p. 84). Self-regulation is a related concept and has been defined as a “set of processes through which the self alters its own responses or inner states in a goal-directed manner” (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012, p. 4). In other words, self-regulation is an effort to alter circumstances to meet a specific goal, while self-control is an effort to override certain responses in order to suppress one goal in order to pursue another (McCullough & Carter, 2013).

Some researchers have suggested that faith has an impact on various behaviors, such as drug/alcohol use, delinquency, and criminal behavior because faith and spirituality promote self-control and self-regulation (McCullough & Carter, 2013; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009; Zell & Baumeister, 2013). McCullough and Carter reviewed the empirical literature on how religion and spirituality relate to self-control and self-regulation and concluded that religion does indeed promote self-control and self-regulations through a variety of mechanisms including influencing how goals are set and pursued, facilitating self-monitoring, helping the development of self-regulatory strengths, and prescribing and fostering self-regulatory behaviors. Faith beliefs and practices, as a result, may promote various character traits that enhance self-regulation and impulse control and in effect reduce antisocial and behavioral excesses in addition to promoting prosocial activities.

Some empirical support for the proposition that faith impacts various behaviors via self-control is available. First, there is considerable research linking faith and self-control. In a meta-analysis conducted by McCullough and Willoughby in 2009, results indicated a consistent relationship between religiousness and intrinsic religious motivation and higher scores on measures of both general self-control and personality traits with a large self-control component (e.g., conscientiousness). This meta-analysis also suggested that engaging in specific faith practices, such as prayer and meditation, may increase one’s level of self-control and self-regulation (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009).

Others have described the mediational role of self-control with regard to recovery from addiction. In one study, attributions of high internality, stability and control of prevention behaviors predicted abstinence following alcohol dependency (Vielva & Iraurgi, 2001). In another study, spiritual orientation coupled with strong internal control beliefs was reported to result in longer sobriety for individuals already seeking assistance for their alcoholism (Murray, Malcarne, & Goggin, 2003).

Given that self-control/regulation has been linked independently to both faith and substance use/abuse, researchers have begun to study self-control/regulation as a mediator of the relationship between faith and substance use/abuse. In one study of middle and high school students, Walker and colleagues (2007) found that as self-rated importance of religion increased, the use of addictive substances such as



alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes decreased and this relationship was mediated by self-control. In a recent nationally representative sample, Desmond and colleagues (Desmond, Ulmer, & Bader, 2013) also found that self-control partially mediated the inverse relationship between faith and both alcohol and marijuana use. In a recent experimental study, Laurin et al. (2012) used a procedure that utilized activating thoughts of God to examine its effects on self-regulation. Their findings suggested that participants who were reminded of God, compared to neutral or positive concepts, demonstrated both decreased active goal pursuit and increased temptation resistance. Their findings suggested that exposure to God influenced goal pursuit that both enhanced and hindered self-regulation.

Although this preliminary evidence supports the potential mediating role of self-control/regulation in the faith-substance use link, one study found a lack of mediational effects in a sample of African-American adolescents (Wills, Gibbons, Gerrard, Murry, & Brody, 2003). Clearly, additional research is needed to examine the role of self-control in mediating the faith-substance use link. Additional research is also needed to examine the potential role of self-control as it relates to other faith-behavior relationships such as additional health-related behaviors, ethical behavior, and prosocial behavior. Although there has been some speculation that self-control might be one possible mechanism underlying the faith-prosocial behavior link including both altruism and forgiveness (David, Hook, Van Tongeren, Gartner, & Worthington, 2012; Saroglou, 2012, 2013), no empirical research to date has specifically examined self-control as a mediator of this relationship.

### ***3.3.3 Social Learning Theory***

Social Learning Theory was first studied by Albert Bandura in his studies of how children model aggression by adults. Bandura has described not only how modeling or observational learning occur in general, but also the psychological impact and mechanisms of spiritual modeling in particular (Bandura, 2003). According to Bandura, individuals learn spiritual behaviors through various stages that include attention, retention, repetition, and motivation. Faith communities provide many opportunities to attend to, retain, repeat, and be motivated to engage in the various behaviors described in this chapter. Others have also articulated in great detail how Bandura's principles of modeling apply to faith (Oman & Thoresen, 2003).

Religious communities may promote prosocial behaviors by providing role models of such behavior within faith congregations and the wider faith community. In addition, models of prosocial actions such as forgiveness and helping are provided through Scriptures and/or rituals (McCullough et al., 2005; Saroglou, 2012, 2013; Tsang et al., 2005). Empirical evidence to support these notions has begun to appear demonstrating that individuals learn from various spiritual models. The results of one study with college students, for example, found that they were able to learn by observing and mimicking others to behave spiritually, religiously,



and ethically (Oman et al., 2007). Much of the research in this area is descriptive and focuses on self-report of the importance of spiritual modeling and various individuals who serve as sources of spiritual modeling (e.g., Oman et al., 2009). One exception is a study conducted by Schwartz (2006) who examined the influence of both peer and parent models on religiosity among 4, 600 adolescents. Schwartz found that peers and parents influenced adolescents' religiosity by faith modeling or "demonstrated authenticity and consistency" and faith dialogue or "dyadic sharing and accountability" (p. 317). Another exception is a study conducted by Oman and colleagues (2012) which found positive associations between a spiritual modeling measure and a variety of health promotion behaviors including exercise, diet, adequate sleep, seatbelt use, and lack of smoking.

Although significant theoretical discussion has focused on modeling and observational learning as a potential mechanism to explain the faith-behavior connections, empirical research to date that tests this link is limited. Some research provides indirect evidence of modeling effects, but more direct research is needed. For example, there is consistent evidence that children's religiosity appears to mirror that of their parents' in terms of church attendance and prayer (Francis & Brown, 1991; Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004). Although such evidence provides indirect support of social learning theory, more controlled research that examines modeling more directly is needed. Additional research is also needed to examine how spiritual modeling impacts additional health-related behaviors in addition to its impact on various ethical and prosocial behaviors.

### ***3.3.4 Positive Emotions***

Some have suggested that faith may exert effects on behaviors, at least in part, through the promotion of positive affect (Fredrickson, 2002; Oman & Thoresen, 2002; Park, 2007). Faith and spiritual experiences have been linked to a variety of positive emotions such as hope, gratitude, and well-being, among others (see Chap. 2 for a review). According to the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, such emotions are significant because they both broaden individuals' momentary thought-action repertoire and build their enduring personal resources (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). As a result, positive emotions can enhance individuals' personal resources including physical, social, intellectual, and psychological (Frederickson, 1998) and can thus impact a variety of behaviors.

Studies specifically in the area of health and health behaviors are beginning to appear that demonstrate how affect serves as a mediator of the link between faith and health-related behaviors. In a study conducted by Park and colleagues (2009) researchers examined this link in a sample of 167 young adults who had survived some type of cancer. These researchers examined the relationship between various health behaviors and church attendance, spiritual experiences, and religious struggles. In addition, they examined the extent to which positive affect (self-assurance) and negative affect (guilt/shame) mediated these links. Results indicated that emotions

can serve a mediational role between faith and health behaviors. Self-assurance partially mediated the effects of daily spiritual experiences, while guilt/shame partially mediated the effects of religious struggle. In other words, there were links between participants' daily spiritual experiences with their exercise and adherence to their doctors' advice, which were mediated by attendant higher levels of self-assurance. In addition, participants' degree of religious struggle was linked to their frequency of alcohol use and lack of adherence to doctors' advice through attendant high levels of guilt/shame.

Although the results of this study provide information that is helpful in understanding how faith impacts health behaviors through its influence on both positive and negative emotions, additional research is needed to examine other emotions in addition to self-assurance and guilt/shame such as hope, self-esteem, and anxiety. In addition, these findings suggest that some aspects of faith, namely religious struggles, are associated with negative emotions and may therefore have a negative impact on certain behaviors. More research is needed to examine both positive and negative emotions related to different faith variables and their mediational role in not only additional health-related behaviors, but also ethical and prosocial behaviors.

### 3.4 Implications

The research reviewed in this chapter points to the potential of faith to both promote various prosocial and health-promoting behaviors, as well as to protect against unethical behavior and several health-risk behaviors. The research on altruism suggests the potential for using faith in order to cultivate both empathy and altruism in individuals. For example, it may be possible to enhance altruistic behaviors by introducing people to certain faith activities, such as meditation, that facilitate the experience of self-transcendence and nurture the development of more nonliteral ways of thinking about spirituality or religious concepts (Huber & MacDonald, 2012). There is some research that suggests the efficacy of such approaches to enhancing both empathy and altruism. In the Buddhist tradition, for example, there exists a specific meditation practice often referred to as Loving-kindness meditation (LKM), which focuses on the cultivation of positive emotions to increase compassion and helping behavior in everyday life (Shapiro & Sahgal, 2012). Research evaluating LKM has shown that LKM is effective in reducing pain and psychological distress, generating a wide range of positive emotions (e.g., love, joy, gratitude, contentment, hope, pride, etc.), and increasing personal resources such as mindful attention, self-acceptance, and positive relations with and feelings of connection to others (Carson et al., 2005; Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, 2008). Other research has shown that such methods can also impact personal transformation to increase empathy and altruism (DiLalla, Hull, & Dorsey, 2004; Kristeller & Johnson, 2005). Research into the development and evaluation of empathy and altruism promoting

interventions is in its infancy and therefore future research is needed to determine the effectiveness of various interventions, which components of these interventions are effective, and how these interventions might be effective across diverse populations (Shapiro & Sahgal, 2012).

Since faith seems to promote forgiveness, it would be helpful for forgiveness interventions to incorporate faith elements. A number of interventions to promote forgiveness without a faith component have been established and evaluated over the past 25 years (Rye, Wade, Fleri, & Kidwell, 2013). Studies have demonstrated the efficacy of such programs in terms of increasing forgiveness for specific offenses and willingness to forgive for intervention participants versus control participants (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991; Freedman & Enright, 1996; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Reed & Enright, 2006). A few studies have incorporated programmatic elements from these interventions in addition to adding a faith component and demonstrated similar benefits (Lampton, Oliver, Worthington, & Berry, 2005; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Rye et al., 2005; Stratton, Dean, Nonneman, Bode, & Worthington, 2008). Of note, however, is the fact that many of the interventions that included faith elements were compared to forgiveness interventions without faith elements with no distinguishable benefits (Rye et al., 2013). In two studies, however, participants in both the faith inclusive and non-faith inclusive interventions reported using faith-based strategies in their attempts to forgive although the impact of these strategic attempts was not assessed (Rye & Pargament, 2002; Rye et al., 2005). In addition, a recent experimental treatment study examined the potential benefits of prayer in enhancing forgiveness and demonstrated that prayer increased state forgiveness, as well as empathy toward one's offender (Vasiliauskas & McMinn, 2013). These findings suggest the important impact of faith in these interventions, regardless of whether the interventions are faith-based or not. Future research should examine the impact of various forgiveness enhancing strategies as well as individual participants' personal faith beliefs and commitments on forgiveness. In addition, most studies have examined the impact of forgiveness interventions with a faith component on college students and so additional efforts need to include other populations. Finally, because interventions that have incorporated a faith component have only included content from mainstream Protestant Christian perspectives, future intervention development and evaluation research should incorporate and examine other Christian and non-Christian perspectives (Rye et al., 2013).

Various faith-based interventions might also be effective in reducing delinquency, crime, and prisoner recidivism. There are several interventions that have shown promising results, such as programs for youth and faith-based programs that have been implemented in prisons. One such program is Prison Fellowship, which is a nonprofit religious program for institutionalized prisoners which provides group Bible study, spiritual development seminars, and life-planning seminars. In one evaluation study of the program conducted by Johnson and colleagues (1997), a group of 201 former inmates who participated in Prison Fellowship were matched with 201 former inmates who did not participate in the program. Both groups were similar in terms of the adjustment to prison, committing similar numbers and types

of institutional infractions. Although no differences between groups were observed on recidivism rates at 1-year follow-up overall, when rates of participation in Bible study groups was examined, inmates with high participation had lower recidivism rates than non-Prison Fellowship participants. Additional follow-up of these groups during an 8-year period revealed that high participation in Bible study groups continued to impact recidivism with the most profound effect occurring at 2- and 3-year follow-up (Johnson, 2004). Another program that has been more recently implemented is the Inner-Change Freedom Initiative, which is a Christian-based program that includes three phases that together last between two and a half to three years (Johnson & Larson, 2003). The first two phases include Bible, GED, and life skills education, tutoring and mentoring, substance abuse prevention, community service work, community Bible study, and support to improve one's personal faith and social relations with family members. The final phase is designed to assist participants in reintegrating into society (e.g., help with housing, employment, and connecting with a local church community). Former inmates who completed the program were compared to those who did not with the former being less likely to be arrested or incarcerated at the 18-month follow-up. Further program development and evaluation are needed not only to expand current efforts but to also incorporate programs that include non-Christian faith components as well as community level treatment and prevention efforts (Koenig et al., 2012).

Various faith-related interventions have also been proposed to help enhance health-promoting behaviors and to decrease health-risk behaviors. Faith and spirituality, for example, have been touted as critical elements in successful treatment and recovery for alcohol and drug abuse and dependency (Gorsuch, 1993; Pullen, Modrcin-Talbott, West, & Muenchen, 1999). Some research has compared those who are more religious to those who are less religious and found better treatment outcomes among those who are more religious (Avants, Warburton, & Margolin, 2001; Jarusiewicz, 2000). In a national sample of over 10,000 individuals in 70 different drug treatment programs, Shields and colleagues (2007) concluded that a religious or spiritual emphasis in treatment programs was positively related to treatment outcomes, although it was unclear what specific contribution religion made compared to other features of the treatment programs. The Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) 12-step program is a good example of an intervention that is explicitly based on spiritual principles including dependence on a Higher Power, prayer and meditation, self-examination, and assistance to others (Carroll, 1993). Some evidence suggests the effectiveness of this program in improving substance use outcomes and accepting the need for treatment (Ferri, Amato, & Davoli, 2006; Humphreys & Moos, 2007; Tonigan, Miller, & Schermer, 2002), but studies are limited methodologically. Other faith-based interventions such as mindfulness and other Buddhist-based therapies have demonstrated some effectiveness in substance abuse disorders (Bowen et al., 2009; Marcus et al., 2009; Margolin, Beitel, Schuman-Olivier, & Avants, 2006). Although faith-based treatment programs for substance use and abuse appear promising, further research is needed to determine the specific impact of the faith components of these programs and interventions.

### 3.4.1 *A Cautionary Note*

Finally, a discussion of the various implications of the research on faith and behavior discussed in this chapter necessarily must mention the potential negative impact of some faith variables on behavioral outcomes. We have primarily focused on the positive behavioral outcomes associated with faith, but under some circumstances faith is related to negative behavioral outcomes as we have noted throughout this chapter. Although, the majority of findings relating faith and behavior are positive, clinicians and researchers must remain cognizant of the potential for negative impact. Attention to this fact underlies the importance of examining the impact of faith in order to understand not just how faith is related to behavior, but also why it is related. In the study conducted by Park and colleagues (2009) noted previously, researchers examined the relationship between various health behaviors and church attendance, spiritual experiences, along with religious struggles. In addition, they examined the extent to which positive affect (self-assurance) and negative affect (guilt/shame) mediated these links. In addition to the positive findings described earlier, this study also demonstrated that spiritual struggles were less related to health-promoting behaviors and instead were related to more frequent alcohol consumption and poorer adherence to doctors' advice and medication. Although this relationship was only marginally statistically significant, these findings suggest the importance of recognizing that specific faith variables may be related to negative behavioral outcomes.

## 3.5 Directions for Future Research

Although faith has been shown to correlate with positive behavioral outcomes, the empirical research to date has largely failed to demonstrate that faith *causes* these positive outcomes. The research on delinquency and crime in particular is most compelling, largely because recent studies have used longitudinal designs. In addition, in discussing the empirical research on faith and behavioral outcomes, we have noted that much of the research has resulted in mixed outcomes. These issues are a function of various methodological problems inherent in most of the studies conducted to date and should be improved upon in future research.

Specifically, some of the research uses small, nonsystematic, or non-diverse samples and measures faith in an unsophisticated manner, both of which might obscure the potential mechanisms through which faith might have influence. Many studies in these areas have been conducted with college students or special populations or have confounded age with outcome measures. With regard to the research on faith and honesty, for example, many studies that fail to find any impact of faith on behavioral outcomes have relied on samples of children, high school students, or college students. As another example, the research on altruism largely relies on college student samples. Many have argued that the relationship between faith and these behavioral variables might change as a function of age

and developmental status, or over time, and studies that examine these links should consider age and developmental stage of the individual as well as fluid changes that may occur over time (e.g., Koenig, 2006; Midlarsky et al., 2012; Worthington et al., 2013).

As we have noted throughout this chapter, a variety of diverse measures have been implemented to assess faith ranging from a belief in God, to church attendance, to frequency of prayer, to self-reported religiosity. Yet other studies have operationally defined faith as various religious orientations such as intrinsic, quest, and orthodoxy or fundamentalism. Discrepancies in research findings are no doubt related to the manner in which faith is operationalized. In addition, although a variety of faith measures have been used, the relative effects have only infrequently been tested against one another (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009). One exception is a study conducted by Saroglou et al. (2005), which found different altruism outcomes depending upon whether religiousness was isolated from spirituality. Greater attention should be given to how faith and spirituality are defined and, in particular, various dimensions of these constructs need to be teased out and evaluated. Researchers have called for theoretical models that recognize the multidimensional nature of constructs because faith can only be understood descriptively through its cognitive, affective, experiential, and behavioral expressions (MacDonald, 2000a, 2000b). Because faith and spirituality are multidimensional constructs, future research should examine them as such, in addition to examining the relative effects of various faith and spirituality dimensions on behavioral outcomes.

Similar definitional issues are present when examining behavioral outcome variables associated with faith, which might also impact findings as well as limit how well results can be generalized. Much of the research, particularly on altruism, forgiveness, and honesty, has incorporated behavior outcome variables that assess behavioral dispositions or intentions rather than actual behavior per se. More research is needed that creatively assesses these constructs as overt and measurable behaviors. In addition, researchers must also recognize the multidimensional nature of outcome variables. Empathy, which is integrally related to helping behavior, for example, has been shown to consist of a variety of components such as fantasy, empathic concern, personal distress, and perspective-taking (Huber & MacDonald, 2012). Studying the multidimensional nature of various outcome variables is important to increase our understanding of how and why faith impacts specific behaviors. Finally, there have been few explanations offered for why faith might exert a beneficial effect on some outcomes, but not others. Research is needed to examine whether faith influences various outcomes through particular pathways.

There are several other methodological issues that should be addressed in future research. Studies in general, for example, do not provide controls for participation in nonreligious activities, leaving open the possibility that positive outcomes are the result of social support in general, rather than the contribution of faith per se. The research examining the link between faith and delinquency and crime, for example, has been criticized for having too few studies that address the potential of peer effects even though they are potentially influential (Cornwall, 1989; Ozorak, 1989). For example, Bryant (2007) found that having a strong friendship network actually

diminished negative effects of religious participation on emotional well-being. Research examining the link between faith and behavior in other areas of study should attempt to model the research on the relationship between faith and alcohol/drug use, which has typically controlled for an exhaustive list of potentially confounding variables and yet continues to support this link (Koenig et al., 2012).

There has also been a relative dearth of research that examines the relationship between faith and behavior from a cross-cultural perspective that includes other faith traditions beyond Christianity. This is true despite the fact that there is considerable evidence that prosocial and health-risk behaviors are important to all world religions (Donahue & Nielson, 2005; Higgins, 2001; Rye et al., 2000; Shapiro & Sahgal, 2012; Slattery & Park, 2011). There are a few exceptions (e.g., research on the faith-alcohol/drug use connection) and future researchers should use these studies as models to expand research interest in the field. Yablo and Field (2007), for example, conducted a study that compared Thai and U.S. college students on altruism and helping behavior. The authors argued that because Thai-Buddhist culture has traditionally taught the importance of prosocial behaviors, Thai students might be more inclined to engage in prosocial behaviors. Results supported the researchers' hypothesis in that Thai students scored higher on a self-report measure of altruism and manifested a greater tendency to offer altruistic projections (and reported they would personally help in such situations) compared to U.S. students. Furthermore, interview data revealed that Thai students appealed to religion as a reason for helping others significantly more than U.S. students did. Future research should not only examine additional world religions but should also attend to the various socio-cultural-religious values that might impact the relationship between faith and behavior.

Finally, there has been a relative lack of adherence to and utilization of scientifically rigorous models and theories by researchers. In one recent review of 43 studies, for example, researchers found that over half of the studies reviewed were atheoretical or had no clear framework (Rew & Wong, 2006). In addition, our review of the research literature highlights the importance of examining contextual factors when studying the connection between faith and behavioral outcomes. In many cases, faith relates to various outcome variables only under certain circumstances or depending on various conditions as in the research reviewed on forgiveness and helping behavior. Researchers must examine not only whether faith is related to various outcome variables, but also how and why they are related. More recent research has begun to examine faith-behavior relationships using more sophisticated methods that can take into account both theory and the complicated relationships that exist between faith and behavior. One example is the research on faith and forgiveness that tests the models proposed by Worthington and colleagues which, are beginning to receive considerable empirical support (Davis et al., 2008, 2012; Worthington et al., 2012). Greater attention to theory development is needed to guide future research. Such theory development would benefit from the recognition that the study of prosocial and health behaviors is a multidisciplinary undertaking that should draw from the expertise of many disciplines including medicine, sociology, and anthropology among others.



Additional research is also needed to further knowledge and understanding of potentially impactful intervention and prevention strategies. Information about the efficacy of many of the intervention programs discussed in this chapter is lacking. For example, although AA's 12-step program has existed for decades, very little information is known about the efficacy of the therapeutic and spiritual aspects of the program (Koenig et al., 2012). From a positive psychology perspective, empirical research on the faith-behavior connection should have as its ultimate purpose the enhancement of optimal human functioning which can be nurtured through intervention strategies that are evidence-based.

### 3.6 Chapter Summary

The major world religions emphasize the importance not only of beliefs but also of actions. In this chapter, we have reviewed a number of areas of study that have examined the relationship of religious faith to behaviors of interest in the social sciences. Numerous studies have indicated that religious beliefs and practices are associated with various prosocial behaviors such as altruism and helping, forgiveness, and a variety of ethical and moral behaviors, although associations are moderate to small and in some cases findings are mixed. Studies generally support a connection between faith and helping, for example, with people of faith being somewhat more likely to be helpful than their nonreligious counterparts. However, contextual factors are important and may contribute to findings of weak or modest relationships because helping behavior appears not to be unconditional. Many people of faith, for example, help under circumstances in which the target of the helping behavior is familiar. In addition, people of certain religious orientations, such as orthodoxy and fundamentalism, are particularly less likely to engage in helping behavior when the targets are unfamiliar or hold values that are inconsistent with their own.

The research outcomes examining the relationship between faith and forgiveness are mixed and the nature of the faith-forgiveness relationship depends on the ways in which both constructs are measured. Measures that assess one's general tendency to forgive across multiple situations and relationships tend to be positively associated with faith; in particular, intrinsic faith orientations. In addition, specific quest dimensions are associated with dispositional forgiveness such as efforts devoted to examining religious teachings. In contrast, findings related to measures of forgiveness that assess one's ability to forgive specific self-identified offenses demonstrate more mixed findings. Specific quest dimensions, for example, are positively associated with state forgiveness such as the tendency to focus on the message behind biblical teachings rather than the literal interpretation. Other quest dimensions are associated with less forgiveness, such as openness to change and examination of religious beliefs, feelings of religious doubt, and linking one's religion to questions of meaning and purpose.



Studies that have examined the relationship between faith and honesty have also been mixed. For example, although studies focusing on academically dishonest behavior, such as plagiarism or cheating on exams, tend to find that the majority of students self-report engaging in some form of academic dishonesty, regardless of religious status, studies investigating the relationship between religiousness and cheating on income taxes among adults have found that religious persons are less likely to report cheating on their taxes. Researchers attempting to overcome the biases inherent in self-report studies have used overt behavioral measures of cheating which have yielded mixed findings.

In contrast to these mixed findings, there is strong evidence that faith is inversely related to criminal and delinquent behavior. Longitudinal data suggest that faith serves to inhibit criminal and delinquent behaviors, at least in the short-term (up to 12 months). Reviews of the research literature over the past several decades suggest that as much as 80 % of studies have found an inverse relationship between faith and delinquency/crime. Although much of this research has been conducted with U.S. samples that include youth, studies are beginning to appear from other countries and with adult samples, yielding similar findings. While the majority of studies show a negative relationship between faith and delinquency and crime, the relationships tend to be modest. In addition, the evidence seems to suggest that victimless crimes, such as gambling, are more likely to be deterred by religion than other crimes and the deterrent effect of religion seems to increase when individuals are immersed within a religious community.

Numerous studies have also indicated that religious faith is associated with lower rates of behavior and activities that put health at risk. Studies have found links, for example, between faith and health behaviors such as eating a healthy diet, exercising, and engaging in preventive medical screenings. These relationships have been found consistently among samples of college students, the elderly, and the general community across a variety of faith measures assessing religious activities, spiritual experiences, and faith beliefs. Research has also demonstrated a link between faith and less engagement in and/or acceptance of premarital and extramarital sex. Research is also beginning to appear that suggests that faith is inversely related to sexual risk behavior, although the evidence to date is mixed and shows that links with faith are more likely for females compared to males. Finally, decades of research examining the relationship between faith and alcohol and drug use indicates that faith is an important negative predictor of such use, especially among individuals who are actively involved in religious activities.

There have been several potential mechanisms proposed to help explain why faith might promote prosocial and health-related behaviors. The mechanisms most frequently discussed in the research literature include social control theory, self-regulation and self-control, social learning theory, and positive emotion. It is important to identify the various mechanisms through which faith affects behavioral outcomes because identifying the specific mechanisms of faith that promote optimal human functioning such as forgiveness, empathy, altruism, honesty, ethics, and health-promoting behaviors can lead to greater understanding about how to enhance and facilitate the development of these virtues. Such understanding can

then be translated into various interventions and practices that might benefit people of faith as well as those who proclaim no faith beliefs. Several such interventions have been proposed although evidence of their efficacy is limited to date. A number of interventions to promote forgiveness, for example, have been established and evaluated over the past 25 years. Studies have demonstrated the efficacy of such programs in terms of increasing forgiveness for specific offenses and willingness to forgive for intervention participants versus control participants. A few studies have incorporated programmatic elements from these interventions in addition to adding a faith component and demonstrated similar benefits. Various faith-based interventions are also beginning to appear that show promise in reducing delinquency, crime, and prisoner recidivism such as the Prison Fellowship and the Inner-Change Freedom Initiative. Various faith-related interventions have also been proposed to help enhance health-promoting behaviors and to decrease health-risk behaviors such as the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) 12-step program, an intervention that is explicitly based on spiritual principles.

Although faith has been shown to correlate with positive behavioral outcomes, the empirical research to date has largely failed to demonstrate that faith *causes* these positive outcomes. In addition, much of the research has resulted in mixed findings. These issues are largely a function of various methodological problems inherent in most studies conducted to date and should be improved upon in future research. Specifically, some of the research uses small, nonsystematic, or non-diverse samples and measure faith in an unsophisticated manner, both of which might obscure the potential mechanisms through which faith might have influence. As we have noted throughout this chapter, a variety of diverse measures have been implemented to assess faith and discrepancies in research findings are no doubt related to the manner in which faith is operationalized. Studies also do not typically provide controls for participation in nonreligious activities, leaving open the possibility that positive outcomes are the result of social support in general, rather than the contribution of faith per se. There has also been a relative dearth of research that examines the relationship between faith and behavior from a cross-cultural perspective that includes other faith traditions beyond Christianity. In addition, there has been a relative lack of adherence to and utilization of scientifically rigorous models and theories by researchers. Greater attention to theory development is needed to guide future research. Finally, additional research is needed to further knowledge and understanding of potentially impactful intervention strategies to enhance optimal human functioning.

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## Chapter 4

# Faith and Cognition

Cognition, a central topic within the field of psychology, consists of higher-order mental processes, such as paying attention, perceiving, thinking, reasoning, judging, learning, knowing, imagining, remembering, solving problems, making decisions, and using language. As described in Chap. 1, we define faith as the religious or spiritual beliefs, attitudes, norms, and practices involved in a person's attempts to connect with the sacred. In this chapter, we focus specifically on operational definitions of faith that have a cognitive component, such as religious beliefs, spiritual appraisals, and cognitive faith practices. Furthermore, we focus specifically on how these cognitive aspects of faith relate to positive outcome measures of interest in positive psychology, such as mental health, emotional well-being, positive affect, satisfaction, self-actualization, self-efficacy, sense of purpose, personal growth, and spiritual well-being.

Because key components of faith, such as beliefs, values, and perceptions of what is sacred, are experienced through the cognitive faculties, there are clear links between the experience of faith and cognitive variables. The links between faith and cognition are so strong that they have resulted in an interdisciplinary field of study known as Cognitive Science of Religion, which draws on universal processes of cognition to develop theories about religion, under the assumption that cognition informs and constrains cultural expressions, including those of a religious nature (Barrett, 2013). The field addresses questions such as how cognitive structures are involved in the transmission of religious ideas, how cognition relates to the types of religious beliefs that people hold, and how memory systems influence religious culture (Barrett, 2007). For the purpose of the current discussion, we focus on research from within the discipline of psychology.

In psychological studies, particular characteristics and forms of faith seem to be closely aligned with particular characteristics and forms of thinking, resulting in empirical links between the two. For example, studies have found that spiritual maturity, defined as a mature commitment to spirituality without being dogmatic or intolerant of ambiguity, is related to postformal reasoning, defined as the ability to engage in dialectical thinking in which a person considers the interaction of

competing needs in a given situation (Morton, Worthley, Testerman, & Mahoney, 2006). What these definitions of mature faith and postformal reasoning have in common is the ability to use cognitive faculties to balance perspectives from multiple vantage points and to successfully respond to paradoxes. By this definition, faith maturity is associated with open-mindedness and tolerance for ambiguity.

Another way that faith has been defined in cognitive terms involves cognitions about the importance of faith. Such a measure of one's cognitive orientation toward spirituality is included in the Expressions of Spirituality Inventory (MacDonald, 2000). This measure assesses cognitive beliefs and perceptions that spirituality is relevant and important for personal functioning, identity, and daily living. Empirical studies indicate that this cognitive orientation toward appraising spirituality as important is linked to greater levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and extraversion in one's personality (MacDonald, 2000). A cognitive orientation emphasizing the importance of spirituality has also been associated with lower levels of mental health symptoms assessed by the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 Restructured Clinical Scales, specifically, less passive social withdrawal and more hedonic pleasure (positive emotions scale), fewer beliefs in the malevolence and untrustworthiness of others (cynicism scale), less general unhappiness and hopelessness (demoralization scale), and less nonconformity, disinhibition, and externalizing behavior (demoralization scale). Finally, cognitive appraisals of the importance of spirituality are associated with less boredom proneness among women (MacDonald & Holland, 2002). These findings suggest that appraising faith as important to one's life is associated with a host of positive characteristics.

Thus, cognitive processes are one avenue through which faith has the potential to bring about thriving, flourishing, and optimal human functioning. Faith can influence the general nature of a person's thinking, as religious individuals tend to view the world and life experiences through spiritual lenses (e.g., Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). The idea that meaning is essential to human life is common across many disciplines in psychology and, in particular, positive psychology (Park, 2010). In this chapter, we will review research on faith-based cognitive appraisals and how they can contribute to a meaning system that allows individuals to make sense of the world and find purpose in life. In addition, there is a rich history of research indicating that faith practices, such as prayer and meditation, which are heavily based in cognitive processes and language, relate to mental health and well-being.

Even though a tenet of this chapter is that faith is experienced through cognitions and language, we do not take a reductionist approach to faith, but acknowledge that faith is too complex to explain *only* in terms of people's mental processes. Research on the role of cognitions in faith offers insight into one avenue through which faith is experienced, but this research is not able to speak to *why* faith exists, a question far beyond the scope of this book. Thus, this chapter focuses on faith as a cognitive process, but we do not intend to imply that faith consists only of cognitions, nor do we address the bigger questions about the purpose of faith.

We begin this chapter with a review of empirical research on the role of faith in the task of developing a sense of meaning in life. We then review the implications of making use of specific faith-based cognitive appraisals and examine the

outcomes of cognitive faith practices. Toward the end of the chapter, we include a cautionary note about some of the ways that faith can relate to destructive cognitions. Finally, we consider the implications of this body of research to the field of psychology along with suggestions for future research.

## 4.1 Faith and Meaning

Faith is an important core schema that has the potential to shape a person's understanding of life, oneself, and one's environment (McIntosh, 1995). In this section we consider how faith relates to meaning on global and situational levels (Park, 2013). Global meaning refers to finding order, coherence, and purpose in the world and one's existence. Situational meaning involves meaning ascribed to specific aspects of life or encounters in one's environment. Of course, situational meaning and global meaning are closely related and reciprocally reinforce one another. That is, global meaning systems will inform the ways in which a person interprets specific life events and experiences, and the interpretations of aspects of life can in turn shape one's global meaning system. When there are discrepancies between a person's global meaning system and his or her situational appraisals, this results in stress, raising the need to either revise one's overarching cognitive framework about the world and existence or to reappraise the meaning of a specific situation (Park & Folkman, 1997). In the following sections, we consider how faith relates to each of these levels of meaning.

### 4.1.1 Faith and Global Meaning

We use the term *global meaning* to refer to a cognitive experience of order, coherence, and purpose in one's existence and understanding of the world. Park, Edmondson, and Hale-Smith (2013) have emphasized that people require a system of meaning to comprehend and navigate their environments, and that this system is based in a cognitive framework that provides prediction and explanation. It is important to note that while there are certain panhuman cognitive tendencies that relate to how people make sense of the world, it is not possible to conclude that culture-bound faith practices produce an integrated existential meaning system across all cultures (Barrett, 2013). Nevertheless, for many people, faith provides a philosophical orientation that offers great significance to life, even more so than psychological well-being or physical health (Pargament, 1997). Through the process of offering a sense of coherence about the world, faith can lead to a greater sense of well-being (Byron & Miller-Perrin, 2009). Global meaning is often based on enduring beliefs, such as beliefs about justice, control, and predictability (Park & Folkman, 1997). These beliefs can be faith-based if they are centered on what one perceives to be sacred (Paloutzian & Park, 2005). We will consider a number of ways that faith

can relate to finding global meaning in life, including finding coherence in the world through religious interpretations of mystical experiences or beliefs in God. In addition, we will review a stage model of faith as meaning making.

#### 4.1.1.1 Mysticism

One way in which individuals experience ultimate meaning and coherence in the world is through mystical experiences. Mysticism consists of transient experiences involving conscious awareness of ultimate reality, timelessness, insight, or a sense of unity (Hood & Francis, 2013). Hood and Chen (2013) argued that mysticism transcends culture and is common across faith traditions, as well as outside of faith traditions. However, a distinction has been made between experience and interpretation of mysticism; Hood (1975) has argued that mystical experiences are phenomenologically universal, but that people differ in their ideological interpretations of the experiences. For example, some individuals interpret mystical experiences as positive affect or as a noetic quality, whereas others have the tendency to make sense of mystical experiences in religious terms (Hood et al., 2001). The latter involves using one's faith to understand a mystical experience, and has been termed *religious interpretation* because it involves a cognitive state of perceiving a mystical experience as holy, divine, or sacred.

Research in the U.S. and Iran has indicated that forming religious interpretations of mystical experiences is associated with better emotional and mental health. Among college students in the U.S. (60 % Christian and 33 % of other religions), the tendency to form religious interpretations of mystical experiences was associated with greater feelings of well-being about the direction in which one's life is going, greater beliefs in having a purpose in life, and less negative affect (Byrd, Lear, & Schwenka, 2000). Among Iranian, Muslim college students, religious interpretation has been related to experiencing more self-determination and adaptive functioning (Ghorbani & Watson, 2009) and less depression (Ghorbani, Watson, & Rostami, 2007). Similarly, among Iranian university students, religious interpretation has been associated with less somatization, anxiety, depression, and interpersonal sensitivity, though these results were not observed among American students in the same study (Hood et al., 2001).

#### 4.1.1.2 Belief in a Higher Power

Global meaning can also be based on one's cognitions about God or a Higher Power. One can perceive order and meaning in life on the basis of a Creator who has designed the world. Orienting systems that are based specifically on positive cognitions about a God or deity have been associated with favorable outcomes across countries and cultures. For example, Wiegand and Weiss (2006) found that college students who viewed God as loving expressed more positive mood than those that had an image of God as less loving. Students who viewed God as loving



also reported being more cheerful, excited, glad, happy, and enthusiastic, and less sad, unhappy, and gloomy than those who did not. Research with Indian, Catholic nuns and seminarians also indicated that having a positive view of God is associated with increased positive affect and greater satisfaction with life (Mendonca, Oakes, Ciarrocchi, Sneek, & Gillespie, 2007). These findings persisted even beyond the effects of personality variables.

Several other studies have connected positive cognitions about God to higher self-esteem. Viewing God as loving, accepting, nurturing, or forgiving was associated with higher self-esteem among Catholic high school students (Benson & Spilka, 1973) and Catholic college students (Buri & Mueller, 1993) in the United States and among adolescents in Scotland (Francis, Gibson, & Robbins, 2001). In addition, an orienting system based on beliefs that God is benevolent has been associated with less aggression and more prosocial behaviors and attitudes, including more volunteerism and greater willingness to aid those of another religion (Johnson, Li, Cohen, & Okun, 2013). A sample from Great Britain indicated that people's cognitive perceptions of God are also associated with their values (Pepper, Jackson, & Uzzell, 2010). For example, conceptualizing God as a benevolent guide or as a servant God were each associated with considering benevolence to be a guiding value in life and with placing lesser emphasis on values such as power, hedonism, and self-direction. This was true for both churchgoers and non-churchgoers. Finally, holding a positive God concept can also serve as a coping mechanism that helps individuals adjust to difficult experiences (Aten et al., 2008). We will discuss this last point in more detail later in this chapter.

Even though research about orienting systems based on positive views about God has demonstrated across cultures that benevolent cognitions about God are related to human flourishing, it should be noted that some gender differences have been observed. Research has indicated that men and women are relatively similar in their conceptualizations of God, but that men tend to view God as being controlling more frequently than do women (Chukwu & Rauchfleisch, 2002; Krejci, 1998). These differing cognitions of God may have different implications for men and women. For example, women with more controlling images of God seem to experience more hopelessness, whereas men with more controlling images of God seem to experience less hopelessness (Steenwyk, Atkins, Bedics, & Whitley, 2010). In addition, one study indicated that a positive view of God was associated with more satisfaction with life for men and women, but was predictive of more positive affect among men only (Mendonca et al., 2007).

#### 4.1.1.3 Stage Model of Global Meaning

Fowler (1981) has developed a stage model for understanding how faith relates to the process of finding meaning in the world and one's life. Fowler defined faith itself as the universal human meaning-making process of finding coherence in life and answering basic questions about the world, regardless of whether this process is grounded in a particular religious tradition. Thus, for Fowler, faith is the activity of

making, maintaining, or transforming one's fundamental meaning in life in order to come to an understanding of the world. He suggested that mature faith is distinguished on the basis of the cognitive processes people bring to bear on religious and moral questions.

Fowler (1981) created a model of faith development that outlines the phenomenology of how people develop ways of relating to their world and themselves in light of their understandings of ultimate reality. He described a pre-stage followed by six stages along which meaning making progresses from simple and concrete to complex, abstract, and comprehensive. Advancing through the faith stages involves a multifaceted process of achieving greater complexity in the structures of one's faith, including advances in one's cognitive development, moral reasoning, and perspective taking abilities. Movement through the faith stages involves achieving more sophisticated thinking about coherence in the world and drawing on more complex symbolic representations for the transcendent. In addition, faith development involves shifting from looking to others, to looking to oneself for authority about whether one's beliefs and behaviors are correct, and being more inclusive in one's social awareness involved in meaning making. During progression through these faith stages, individuals become more aware and accepting of the contradictions and paradoxes of their faith.

Fowler's theory of faith development has been examined in numerous empirical studies, generally indicating that higher stages of faith are associated with greater emotional and relational well-being among clinical and nonclinical samples. One example is that among patients and spouses of patients with terminal cancer, those in a higher stage of faith development reported greater quality of life, including in the domains of family and mental health compared to those in lower stages of faith development (Swensen, Fuller, & Clements, 1993). In another study, a small sample of 17 recovering alcoholic adult children of alcoholics showed a moderate to large relationship between stage of faith and being self-actualized along the lines of Maslow's conceptualization (Carroll, 1999). Those who were self-actualized, meaning that their lives involved acceptance, creativity, peak experiences, connection to the spiritual or transcendent, a calling, and fulfillment, were also in higher stages of faith development. In turn, this was associated with less symptomatic distress, as well as fewer and less severe problem areas in life and in relationships. Higher faith development is also associated with less attachment anxiety in romantic relationships among college students (Hart, Limke, & Budd, 2010). Of course, the cross-sectional designs of these studies do not allow us to speak to whether faith development preceded, followed, or occurred simultaneously with these favorable qualities, but it is clear that there is a significant relationship between a person's stage of faith development and various positive outcomes.

An important caveat about this body of research on faith and global meaning is that the studies are predominantly cross-sectional in nature. Therefore, there is no indication of whether mystical interpretations of the world, positive conceptions of God, or particular cognitive stages of faith lead to positive outcomes or vice versa. Of course, it is also possible that unexamined variables relate to both the faith cognitions and positive outcomes. More longitudinal research is necessary for speaking to the directionality of these results.

### ***4.1.2 Faith and Situational Meaning***

In addition to faith being related to meaning on a global level of finding coherence and purpose in one's existence, faith also relates to situational meaning, or how a person interprets specific aspects of life or encounters within his or her environment. In this section, we consider how faith can inform people's cognitive appraisals or reappraisals of events, situations, or other people, and what the implications are for well-being and thriving. Because faith is the foundation of many people's overarching goals and values in life, it often informs appraisals of meaning that people ascribe to the things around them (Pargament, 1997). First we focus on sanctification, a specific positive faith-based cognitive appraisal of aspects of life. Then we will examine how individuals can use faith-based cognitive reappraisals to cope with difficult life events. Finally, we consider how faith relates to appraisals of other individuals when it comes to prejudice and tolerance.

#### **4.1.2.1 Sanctification of Normative Life Events**

Sanctification is a faith-based cognitive appraisal that involves the perception that an aspect of life has divine character or significance (Mahoney et al., 1999; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Sanctification can take two distinct forms: theistic sanctification and non-theistic sanctification. Theistic sanctification is more common among theistically-oriented individuals who believe in particular supernatural beings operating in the world. In theistic sanctification, aspects of life are experienced as a manifestation of one's beliefs, images, or experiences relevant to God or other higher powers. Non-theistic sanctification, on the other hand, does not include reference to a deity. Rather, it involves imbuing aspects of life with divine qualities such as timelessness, ultimate value, and transcendence. Theistic and non-theistic sanctification both involve interpreting life events through a spiritual lens.

Any aspect of life could be viewed through a spiritual frame of reference by seeing God as manifest in it or by imbuing it with sacred qualities (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003). For example, Snyder, Sigmon, and Feldman (2002) have considered how hope can take on sacred significance. Hope theory posits that hope is a goal-directed cognitive process involved in the pursuit of all goals. For religious individuals, spiritual beliefs may dictate their most valued goals. In fact, Snyder et al. (2002) provide examples of how seemingly secular goals such as remaining drug free, exercising regularly, or helping a friend with a problem can be cognitively linked to larger, more abstract religious goals and therefore take on sacredness. Furthermore, faith can influence not only the goals that individuals establish, but also their cognitive sense of agency about achieving the goals. That is, religion can instill confidence in believers that they can accomplish their goals. Theoretically, this should be related to greater psychological well-being.

These theories are supported by empirical evidence. Research has shown that positive spiritual appraisals, such as sanctification, have powerful implications for people's lives (see Pargament & Mahoney, 2005 for a review). Individuals are likely to invest more in matters that are sacred to them. Telephone interviews with a community sample of adults in the U.S. revealed that the degree to which people sanctified aspects of life determined how important they found those aspects of life to be and how committed they were to them (Mahoney, Pargament, et al., 2005). This seemed to be lived out on practical levels as well, as time and energy ratings from the previous 24 h revealed that the participants had spent more time involved in, and thinking about, their more highly sanctified strivings than their less sanctified strivings in life. Thus, sanctified aspects of life, regardless of what they are, seem to elicit more time, attention, and care.

Greater investment in sanctified aspects of life has been shown across a variety of topics as diverse as one's body, work, nature, and forgiveness. Research across the lifespan has indicated that sanctifying one's body is associated with taking greater care of it. A study of college students indicated that viewing one's body as sacred was associated with higher scores on measures assessing the propensity to engage in a host of healthy behaviors that included healthy eating, getting enough sleep, taking vitamins, wearing a seat belt, getting regular medical and dental checkups, watching one's weight, etc. (Mahoney, Carels, et al., 2005). Similar results were found among senior citizens, namely that sanctifying one's body was associated with engaging in more exercise and taking efforts to control and reduce stress (Homan & Boyatzis, 2010). Research has also shown that those who sanctify their work are more committed to their organizations and less intent on leaving their jobs (Walker, Jones, Wuensch, Aziz, & Cope, 2008), those who sanctify nature are more willing to invest personal funds in protecting the environment (Tarakeshwar, Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2001), and those who sanctify forgiveness are more likely to engage in forgiveness across time (Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, & Worthington, 2012). Research on sanctification, therefore, illustrates how faith-based cognitions can influence healthy choices and behaviors, leading to greater well-being. We discuss sanctification of relationships further in Chap. 5.

In addition to investing more in sanctified aspects of life, people are also likely to derive greater satisfaction and well-being from aspects of life that they sanctify. For example, multiple studies have shown that college students who sanctify their bodies report greater body satisfaction (Jacobson, Hall, & Anderson, 2013; Mahoney, Carels, et al., 2005), as well as less body objectification and depersonalization (Jacobson et al., 2013). In addition, cognitive appraisals of premarital sexual intercourse being sacred were predictive of greater sexual satisfaction among college students, beyond the effects of attitudes toward premarital sex (Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005). Similarly, greater perceptions of sexuality as sanctified predicted greater sexual satisfaction, sexual intimacy, and general marital satisfaction among married individuals (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011). Finally, those who sanctify their work experience more job satisfaction (Walker et al., 2008). This is true even for working mothers with one

or more children at home, among whom viewing work as sacred is associated with more positive affect and less struggle regarding role conflicts (Hall, Oates, Anderson, & Willingham, 2012).

Perhaps greater satisfaction derived from sanctified aspects of life stems from the emotions they elicit. It seems that positive spiritual appraisals have the power to bring about very meaningful emotions. For example, sanctification of one's strivings in life was associated with experiencing more gratitude among adults with neuromuscular disease (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005). Pargament and Mahoney (2005) have pointed out that spiritual emotions such as gratitude, humility, love, and obligation are likely to be prominent when people perceive God or sacredness involved in various elements of their lives. More research is needed to explore these emotions and how they relate to cognitive appraisals of sanctification.

It should be noted that most of these studies of sanctification controlled not only for demographic variables, but also for global religiousness – factors such as religious commitment, importance of religion, intrinsic religiousness, frequency of religious service attendance, denominational affiliation, prayer frequency, and prayer experience. This suggests that sanctification appraisals themselves were associated with the outcome measures, and that the links were not the result of the general religiousness of those in the samples. Therefore, it seems that interpreting aspects of life in a positive spiritual light can have a powerful and far-reaching impact on people's lives. Along these lines, sanctification of relationships has also been linked to greater relationship commitment, relationship quality, relationship satisfaction, and more positive and less negative emotion in relationships. These findings related to relationships are discussed further in Chap. 5.

#### 4.1.2.2 Meaning-Making Coping with Stressful Life Events

A body of literature on situational cognitive appraisals has focused on how people make sense of highly stressful life experiences. People ascribe meaning in an effort to understand why events happen, as well as their impact (Taylor, 1983). Being able to come to a satisfying understanding of stressful life events within one's global meaning schema often involves an intentional effort to appraise or reappraise the meaning of an event in a positive light, a process known as meaning-making coping (Park, 2005). Framing one's cognitions about an event in this way is a form of emotion-focused coping, aimed at reducing or managing the emotional distress associated with a difficult situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This cognitive form of coping is particularly relevant in situations that are beyond an individual's control, such as a trauma, loss, or illness. Longitudinal research has shown that meaning-making coping is associated with better adjustment, such as experiencing better psychological well-being, more positive affect, less negative affect, and more personal growth, among both middle-aged adults who have faced cancer (Park, Edmondson, Fenster, & Blank, 2008) and among college students who have lost a loved one (Park, 2008).

The classic model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) focused on appraisals of stressors almost exclusively from the standpoint of negative emotions. In this model, positive states were defined as relief from aversive emotions. However, Folkman (1997) revised this classic approach to acknowledge that individuals persistently experience positive psychological states despite chronic and severe distress associated with negative circumstances. She identified the activation of spiritual beliefs and experiences to cope with a stressor as being one important pathway through which positive psychological states are experienced in the midst of difficult circumstances. It is via this pathway of spiritual beliefs and experiences that individuals find existential meaning. Therefore, faith can play an important role in the cognitive process of meaning-making coping that results in favorable mental and emotional states.

Folkman's revised approach is consistent with the research literature. For example, a study of parents who had lost an infant to sudden infant death syndrome revealed that participation in a religion and importance of religion were longitudinally related not only to less distress, but also to greater emotional well-being among the participants 18 months after their infants' death (McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993). This relationship was facilitated through cognitive processing of the loss and finding meaning in the loss. That is, the more important religion was to the participants and the more they participated in religion, the more they attempted to work through their loss and the more meaning they found in their infants' death. Cognitive processing of the loss and finding meaning in the loss were, in turn, related to greater well-being and less distress over time. A similar pattern was found for individuals coping with Hurricane Katrina, a natural disaster that caused major flooding and destruction in the southern United States. Religious coping with the event was associated with greater post-traumatic growth through the process of deliberate cognitive processing of the event (Bosson, Kelley, & Jones, 2012).

In another longitudinal study, path analyses of coping methods used by male caregiving partners of men with AIDS indicated that faith beliefs and activities facilitated positive reappraisals of the difficult situation, and that these reappraisals resulted in more positive affect over 2 years (Folkman, 1997). Cross-sectional studies have demonstrated similar results. Park (2005) found among 169 college students who had experienced the death of a significant other within the past year, that intrinsic faith was related to greater subjective well-being and stress-related growth, mediated in part by participants' attempts to see the loss in a less distressing way or to find something positive in it. Furthermore, positive attributions can be made not only about one's situation, but also about oneself. Karademas (2010) found among chronic cardiac disease outpatients in Greece that higher levels of intrinsic religiousness were associated with lower perceptions of helplessness and more confidence about being able to manage life with the illness, which, in turn, was associated with better physical and emotional well-being. These longitudinal and cross-sectional studies are consistent with the theory that faith can activate beliefs, values, and goals that help define the positive significance of even the most traumatic events. In this way, finding a redeeming value in a loss or hardship can create meaning, which is associated with greater well-being.

### 4.1.2.3 Benevolent Religious Reappraisals of Stressful Life Events

In addition to faith activating helpful meaning-making processes in general, faith can also be integrated into the specific cognitive appraisals that are formed about a difficult circumstance. While it may be more intuitive to think of positive spiritual appraisals accompanying favorable aspects of life, people also seem to commonly use faith to form benign interpretations of negative situations. Difficult life experiences can create a sense of mastery in the face of challenges and can elicit personal development and growth. They can offer the opportunity for positive life changes. For these reasons, someone might experience spiritual meaning in the hardship or view God as a causal force behind the event, resulting in a less negative impact. Attributions to God's will can add a sense of security and decrease anxiety in the midst of turmoil. Through these situational appraisals, people can restore beliefs central to their global meaning system, such as beliefs in a safe and predictable world or beliefs in a benevolent God who is in control (Pargament, 1997).

Reappraising stressors as less threatening on the basis of one's beliefs about God is a particular form of coping associated with growth and flourishing (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1999). This concept of *benevolent religious reappraisals* has been found to be a salient coping mechanism among individuals of numerous religions, countries, and cultures, thereby offering support for the cross-religious and cross-cultural value of this construct (Loewenthal, MacLeod, Goldblatt, Lubitsh, & Valentine, 2000; Putman, Lea, & Eriksson, 2011). The benefits of benevolent religious reappraisals have been demonstrated for coping with a wide range of stressors across age groups. Some studies have allowed participants to identify the specific stressor about which they report engaging in benevolent religious reappraisals. For example, in the U.S., participants in a large community sample (Pargament et al., 1990) and a large college student sample (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000) reported on the most serious negative event they had experienced in the past 1 or 3 years. Stressors included the death of a family member or friend, serious illness of oneself or a family member, divorce or serious family conflict, among others. Forming benevolent religious reappraisals, regardless of the type of stressor, accounted for unique variance in positive mental health, stress-related growth, and spiritual growth among individuals in these studies. Similarly, in a study conducted in England, individuals who had recently experienced a major life stressor were asked to say why they thought the difficulty happened. Making causal attributions to God for the stressful event was associated with experiencing more positive affect (Loewenthal et al., 2000).

Numerous other studies have focused specifically on the role of benevolent religious reappraisals in coping with health conditions. For example, among 577 medically ill, hospitalized, older adults, benevolent religious reappraisals were associated with more stress-related growth, more spiritual growth, and less depressed mood (Koenig, Pargament, & Nielsen, 1998). Similarly, benevolent religious reappraisals of pain among 29 chronic pain patients were associated with more positive affect (Parenteau et al., 2011). Interestingly, benevolent religious reappraisals were predictive of positive affect beyond the beneficial effects of



behavioral activities. Furthermore, even though benevolent religious reappraisals were related to secular coping strategies, the secular coping strategies did not mediate the links between religious reappraisals and positive affect. The relationship between benevolent religious reappraisals and positive affect could also not be explained on the basis of changes in pain perception. This suggests that there is something unique about benevolent religious reappraisals of pain that is linked to more positive affect.

Research on benevolent religious reappraisals has also been extended to individuals providing care to those with health problems. Among those caring for terminally ill people in their lives, reappraising the situation as part of God's plan or as a means of gaining strength or understanding from God was associated with better adjustment to the situation, including better handling of the situation and their feelings about it, learning from the situation, and feeling better about themselves (Mickley, Pargament, Brant, & Hipp, 1998). Participants in the study also reported experiencing more purpose in life than those who did not make similar reappraisals. It is noteworthy that these religious reappraisals made a unique contribution to the outcomes, above and beyond the effects of similar nonreligious benevolent reappraisals, such as focusing on death as an essential and natural part of nature. Similarly, among family caregivers of cancer patients in India, benevolent religious reappraisals were associated with posttraumatic growth (Thombre, Sherman, & Simonton, 2010). Among caregivers of individuals with dementia in Spain, finding spiritual meaning in their act of caregiving was associated with experiencing less anger (Márquez-González, López, Romero-Moreno, & Losada, 2012).

Few studies have examined faith-based cognitive reappraisals among individuals with serious mental illness. An exception is a study that examined benevolent religious reappraisals over the course of a year among 48 young adults diagnosed with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (Phillips & Stein, 2007). The results indicated that those with mental illness reported benevolent religious reappraisals in frequencies similar to nonpsychiatric samples. Believing that the mental illness was an opportunity to grow spiritually was associated with higher levels of psychological well-being at the beginning of the study and 1 year later. However, both of these findings were cross-sectional, with no longitudinal effects being observed.

In part, it may be that benevolent religious reappraisals function to reduce the cognitive dissonance that arises from being confronted with the grand paradoxes within one's faith. Burris, Harmon-Jones, and Tarpley (1997) examined this in two studies by asking Christian college students in the U.S. to reflect on a veridical news story in which an infant was killed in a drive-by shooting while in his grandmother's arms who was praying for protection. The child's grandfather was quoted to say that they would have to "depend on the Lord to get them through this" (as cited in Burris et al., 1997, p. 21). To raise cognitive dissonance about the occurrence of such tragedies with the existence of a loving God who answers prayers, the researchers added a question about whether the grandfather was naïve and misguided to continue to believe and trust in a good God. After reading the article, some participants were assigned to answer questions about their religious beliefs while others skipped this portion or completed a distractor task. All participants then completed a measure of



negative affect. The results indicated that the students who had the opportunity to reflect about the transcendence of God and affirm their faith convictions experienced less negative affect than those who did not have this opportunity. Higher endorsement of believing in the transcendence of God, such as God working in mysterious but benevolent ways, predicted decreased agitation and discomfort among those who were asked to report on their religious beliefs after reading the article. However, the same was not found for the groups who were asked to report on their religious beliefs before reading the article. Thus, focusing specifically on the benevolence and transcendence of God seemed to offer an opportunity to reappraise the meaning of the tragedy, and was a successful way to reduce negative affect.

It should be noted that benevolent religious reappraisals have typically been shown to predict outcomes beyond the effects of traditional religious variables, as well as other common forms of nonreligious coping, suggesting that faith-based cognitive appraisals are not redundant with general religiosity or with traditional coping methods. Such reappraisals seem to offer a unique and distinct addition to the coping process.

#### 4.1.2.4 Faith and Appraisals of Other People

Thus far, we have considered how faith can be infused into the ways in which individuals interpret specific life events and circumstances. Now, we will briefly consider how faith relates to cognitive appraisals of other people, particularly as it relates to being accepting and tolerant of those who are different from oneself. Prejudice involves forming a favorable or unfavorable cognitive appraisal of another person that is unsupported by experience or facts (Allport, 1954). Social psychology has predominantly focused on instances of prejudice involving negative appraisals on the basis of stereotypes about aspects of people's identities or group memberships, such as race, gender, or age. Allport indicated that the role of faith in prejudice is paradoxical. Its influence is important, but works in contradictory directions. Some faith communities are ethnocentric, promoting exclusivity and prejudice, whereas others are universalistic, instilling acceptance of others in thoughts and behaviors. Recent research has supported this paradox, demonstrating mixed findings about the relationship between faith and prejudice. For example, some studies have shown that higher levels of religiosity and spirituality or activation of religious concepts are associated with higher levels of bias toward groups that violate one's values, such as atheists (Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2012). However, other studies have indicated that identification with one's religious group is associated with more tolerance, less hostility, or at worst, neutral feelings toward atheists, even when faced with materials that threaten one's religious identity (Ysseldyk, Haslam, Matheson, & Anisman, 2012). Thus, even though much of the research on links between faith and appraisals of others has focused on an association between certain aspects of religion and higher levels of prejudice (e.g., Batson & Stocks, 2005), it may not always be the case that identifying with one's religious group promotes hostility to those outside one's group.

A recent meta-analysis of 55 studies on the links between religiosity and racism in the U.S. indicated that some aspects of faith were related to greater racism, including greater religious identification, greater extrinsic religiosity (an instrumental approach to religion that is motivated by external factors such as the desire to meet social needs), and greater religious fundamentalism (a cognitive style reflecting an unwavering or dogmatic certainty in one's beliefs; Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010). However, it should be noted that the strength of the relationships of religious identification, extrinsic religiosity, and fundamentalism to racism decreased significantly over the years of the studies included in the meta-analysis. In addition, Hall et al. (2010) and others have concluded that the links between religious fundamentalism and racism are attributable to religious authoritarianism, which is characterized by an orientation to religion that is based on obedience to authority, aggression toward other groups, and conventionalism. However, this conclusion has been questioned by Mavor, Louis, and Laythe (2011), who believe that it is based on a misinterpretation of artifactual suppressor effects that occur when authoritarianism and other intercorrelated measures of conventional social attitudes, such as fundamentalism, are considered to be independent in analyses.

Allport (1954) concluded that "we cannot speak sensibly of the relation between religion and prejudice without specifying the *sort* of religion we mean and the role it plays in the personal life" (p. 456). While making no attempt to deny links between certain forms of faith and greater negative appraisals of people different from oneself, consistent with the positive psychology perspective of this book, here we explore particular forms of faith and aspects of faith that relate to greater levels of tolerance and acceptance in one's cognitive appraisals of others.

There is a strong theoretical basis for faith having the potential to increase tolerance and acceptance in people's evaluations of others. The idea that faith can promote acceptance of others is certainly not new. Morse (1912) identified that religion, similar to education, has the power to enable people to overcome prejudice and be open minded. First of all, faith values can provide motivation for individuals to control biases and negative appraisals of others that they experience (Rowatt, Shen, LaBouff, & Gonzalez, 2013). Faith practices such as prayer and meditation can help a person regulate unfounded negative appraisals that are formed of others (Doehring, 2013). Religious beliefs, values, and practices can be used in personal, communal, and cultural ways to counteract prejudice, for example, by focusing on beliefs that are contrary to prejudice, such as God being loving and compassionate, or by promoting a commitment to social justice (Doehring, 2013).

In addition, religion can engender tolerance by offering individuals humility, a sense of control and stability, and a clear standard for loving others (Allport, 1954). This is bolstered by social learning from prime models of tolerance, such as Jesus, Buddha, Gandhi, and Mother Theresa. Gorsuch and Fulton (2012) point out Jesus' choice to associate with all people and his teaching to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27) with a radical challenge to ethnocentrism in his explanation of who should be considered a neighbor. They describe additional aspects of the

Christian faith that promote greater tolerance toward others, such as theology regarding God being the father of all, regardless of differences. In addition, Sandage, Dahl, and Harden (2012) have described how faith can be integrated into models of multicultural and intercultural competence.

There is empirical evidence to support the theoretical basis that faith can minimize prejudice in appraisals of others. In addition to finding links between several forms of faith and racial prejudice, Hall et al.'s (2010) meta-analysis also indicated that measures of the content of people's religious beliefs were unrelated to racism and that some aspects of faith were related to *less* racial prejudice, suggesting that faith has the potential to promote greater tolerance. Specifically, forms of faith associated with less racist appraisals of others included intrinsic religiosity and quest. As described in Chap. 1, intrinsic religiosity involves a commitment to religion as an end in itself, with no ulterior motives for one's faith, and quest is an orientation toward religion that accepts and values existential questions, religious doubt, and change. While the meta-analysis revealed that links between certain forms of faith and more racism had declined over time, the magnitude of effects of intrinsic religiosity and quest on less racism remained stable throughout the years. Similar to Hall et al. (2010), Leak and Finken (2011) found that a quest orientation to faith, as well as faith maturity, were related to greater tolerance toward minority groups including ethnic, sexual orientation, and religious minorities. Along these lines, Holland, Matthews, and Schott (2013) found that more liberal Christian traditions and non-Christian faiths were associated with higher levels of tolerance toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered individuals.

These links between particular forms of faith and greater tolerance may be explained in part by the notion that various forms of faith that have been examined in the empirical literature represent particular cognitive styles (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). For example, fundamentalism represents convergent thinking in which new information is incorporated into existing religious schemas, bolstering original beliefs. In contrast, a quest approach to religion is associated with more complexity in thinking and openness to adaptation in beliefs. Thus, relations between quest and tolerance may reflect, in part, a tendency for people to go beyond social norms to think more complexly about people who are different from themselves.

It should be noted that the nature of faith also interacts with social context in determining attitudes towards others. For example, in a Canadian sample, an intrinsic religious orientation predicted greater ascribed importance to multiculturalism, whereas for U.S. participants, intrinsic orientation predicted greater emphasis on national heritage – both reflecting endorsement of national ideology (Gorsuch & Fulton, 2012). This is consistent with one interpretation of past empirical findings that it is social conformity rather than certain forms of faith per se that relates to higher levels of prejudice. Therefore, it is important to understand that faith does not impact cognitive appraisals in isolation, but is influenced by a host of other factors in the individual's life and environment.

Looking beyond forms or orientations toward faith, a number of studies have also supported the idea that specific religious beliefs and values can promote tolerance and minimize negative out-group sentiments. For example, Pargament, Trevino, Mahoney, and Silberman (2007) found that engaging in religious thoughts and behaviors that emphasized Christian love in order to cope with appraisals of Jews as desecrators of Christianity was associated with lower anti-Semitism. Focusing on Christian love included things like reminding oneself that God loves all people. In a similar study examining views that Muslims desecrate Christian values, both focusing on Christian love and learning from Muslim spiritual models were associated with lower anti-Muslim appraisals (Raiya, Pargament, Mahoney, & Trevino, 2008).

With a more complex design, Rothschild, Abdollahi, and Pyszczynski (2009) elucidated previous findings indicating that being faced with one's death typically results in individuals defending their faith, sometimes by derogating or supporting violence against those who do not share their beliefs. In a series of studies, they examined whether focusing on compassion inherent to one's faith would minimize disdain and support for violence against others, when individuals were asked to think about their own death and afterlife (compared to a control of thinking about being in extreme pain). They found that thinking about death and religious fundamentalism were both associated with more hostile anti-Western attitudes among Muslim college students in Iran and were associated with more support for violent military responses to conflict in the Middle East among college students in the U.S. However, when the Iranian students were primed with compassionate values from the Koran, rather than secular compassionate values, their anti-Western attitudes decreased. A similar result occurred among the American students who were high in religious fundamentalism, in that being primed with compassionate values from the Bible, rather than secular compassionate values, was associated with decreases in support for violent interventions in the Middle East. These findings were not attributable to participants' political orientation or even strength of religious belief, which were both controlled in the analyses.

Therefore, it seems that faith is related to prejudice in a variety of destructive, but also a variety of beneficial ways. This paradox relates to religion and spirituality being multidimensional in nature (Doehring, 2013), and it is important to recognize distinctions that exist when it comes to faith. Experimental research has indicated that moral concern for protecting one's religious group can be associated with greater ingroup co-operation, but also less favorable stances toward outsiders, whereas the virtues and moral standards inherent to faith are associated with more moral action towards outsiders (Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010). The empirical literature also suggests that, in addition to the content of faith beliefs relating to appraisals of others, specific social-cognitive aspects of faith, such as the complexity of one's thinking or the influence of one's social environment, also relate to the cognitive appraisals that are formed about others. In sum, while it is clear that some forms of faith are related to negative appraisals of people different from oneself, other aspects of faith offer powerful beliefs, values, and practices that can be used to promote love, acceptance, and tolerance of others.

## 4.2 Cognitive Faith Practices and Positive Outcomes

Thus far, we have considered faith-based cognitions as predictors of positive outcome measures. Now we shift to faith practices with a cognitive component. Specifically, we consider how prayer and meditation relate to positive psychological outcomes.

### 4.2.1 Prayer

William James (1902) described prayer as an inward communion or conversation with a power considered divine. Others have followed by defining prayer as an act of communicating with a supernatural agent or object of worship (e.g., Maselko, 2013), or expand this definition to include communicating with oneself and others, in addition to communicating with a higher power (Ladd & Spilka, 2002). In the empirical literature, prayer tends to be conceptualized as either affective or cognitive in nature (Francis & Evans, 1995). Since prayer can be defined as a higher-order mental process involving language, it can certainly be considered a cognitive activity. Several studies have examined the cognitive nature of prayer. For example, multi-modal research, including experimental designs, has been used to examine people's common cognitions about how God responds to prayer, making it clear that the way individuals cognitively conceptualize Higher Powers influences the way they pray (Barrett, 2001, 2002). In addition, qualitative interviews have indicated that the language used in prayer is often what makes it memorable, specifically, when there is a juxtaposition between the human and spiritual domain, such as prayer for a weak, fragile person contrasted to the strong and powerful divine (Wuthnow, 2008). Furthermore, there is empirical support that improvised prayer, during which participants converse with God in their own ways, is associated with brain activity similar to having a mental conversation with another person (Schjoedt, Stødkilde-Jørgensen, Geertz, & Roepstorff, 2009). Thus, at least informal prayer seems to involve social cognition.

Masters and Spielmans (2007) have suggested that because prayer can be conceptualized as an act of cognition, it is probable that it functions like other cognitive processes and can therefore relate to varying outcomes depending on the particular cognitive content and processes undertaken in prayer. A comprehensive review of literature on prayer has shown a range of positive psychological, behavioral, and health correlates of engaging in prayer (Spilka & Ladd, 2013). Here, we review links between prayer and positive psychological outcome measures from a number of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. We will not include the literature on physical health outcomes of prayer or on the effects of being prayed for by others.

#### 4.2.1.1 Cross-Sectional Research on Prayer

In support of the idea that prayer can relate to varying outcomes dependent on the particular cognitive content or processes employed, research has indicated that different forms of prayer are associated with different types of well-being. Poloma and Pendleton (1991) identified four types of prayer through factor analyses. They found differences in well-being associated with the various types of prayer. Meditative prayer, a nonverbal form a prayer focused on intimacy and personal relationship with a Higher Power, was associated with existential well-being and religious satisfaction. Colloquial prayer, which is a conversational style of prayer that incorporates abstract petitions such as asking for personal guidance or blessings, was associated with greater happiness. Finally, ritual prayer, involving reciting prayers from memory or readings, was associated with greater depression, loneliness, and tension. Maltby, Lewis, and Day (2008) assessed the same aspects of prayer and found that while several forms of prayer were associated with better mental-health scores, meditative prayer was the only type of prayer that accounted for unique variance in well-being, assessed on the basis of anxiety, depression, social dysfunction, and somatic symptoms. Thus, this indicates that quiet reflection about God in prayer may be instrumental in wellbeing.

Making use of a different model, Whittington and Scher (2010) found unique associations for six types of prayer. Three were associated with positive psychological factors. Prayers of thanksgiving, involving expressions of gratitude towards God, were predictive of subjective well-being, self-esteem, and optimism. Prayers of reception, involving an attitude of openness while waiting for divine wisdom or guidance, were predictive of self-esteem, optimism and meaning of life. Finally, prayers of adoration, focused on the worship of God, were predictive of optimism and meaning of life. Oppositely, prayers of obligation that are required by one's religion, often involving fixed prayers repeated at worship times, were negatively associated with optimism. Prayers of confession, involving admission of negative behaviors with a request for forgiveness, were negatively associated with subjective well-being, self-esteem, and optimism. Finally, prayers of supplication, involving requests for God's intervention in specific life events for oneself or others, were negatively associated with subjective well-being. Whittington and Scher concluded that there are positive forms of prayer and negative forms of prayer, with prayers that are less ego-focused and more focused on God being associated with positive outcomes.

However, another interpretation is that these findings are consistent with a stress-mobilization theory of religious coping, according to which prayers focused on coping with difficulties will be correlated with the distress resulting from the difficulties. One of the functions of prayer is that it is a powerful way to cope with stressful situations. It may be particularly valuable psychologically when stressors are outside of the individual's control. Prayer can empower a person to make it through a difficult situation by relying on a Higher Power. However, because individuals tend to turn to prayer to seek divine help or comfort particularly when they experience hardships, cross-sectional research is likely to show an

association between the occurrence or frequency of prayer and the distress associated with hardships. This is illustrated in a study of individuals going through major cardiac surgery who were assessed before and after the surgery (Ai, Peterson, Bolling, & Rodgers, 2006). Whereas preoperative use of various religious coping methods (prayer not specifically assessed) was associated with better global functioning after surgery, even when controlling risk factors such as depression, age, preoperative illness impact, and other chronic conditions, postoperative use of prayer to cope with adversity was associated with worse global functioning. Thus, cross-sectionally, prayer was related to poorer functioning, implying that participants were turning to prayer due to the distress of their condition. Thus, the cross-sectional associations of prayer must be distinguished from the longitudinal effects of prayer on outcomes. Based on this stress-mobilization theory, the psychological outcomes of prayer should be examined with longitudinal research, which we will review momentarily.

One of the methodological difficulties in this body of research is that terminology for forms of prayer is not consistent across all studies, making it difficult to compare the outcomes of different types of prayer to one another. There are two aspects of prayer that have repeatedly stood out as predictive of well-being, beyond the particular form of prayer engaged in: frequency of prayer and subjective experiences of prayer. Frequency of prayer has been associated with greater psychological well-being (e.g., Poloma & Pendleton, 1990) and has even been shown to be a dominant factor in the relationship between religiosity and psychological well-being, in that frequency of praying mediates the relationship between other measures of religiosity and well-being (Maltby, Lewis, & Day, 1999). Furthermore, it seems that one's experience during prayer is an even better predictive of positive outcomes than frequency of prayer. That is, evaluating whether a person experiences deeper insight, a sense of God's presence, or peace during prayer has been predictive of more aspects of well-being than frequency of prayer alone, including life satisfaction, happiness, and existential well-being (Poloma & Pendleton, 1990, 1991). Maltby et al. (2008) found that both frequency of prayer and subjective experiences while praying accounted for unique variance in well-being beyond the particular type of prayer. Thus, regardless of the form prayer takes, frequency of praying and subjective experiences while praying may be the best predictors of well-being.

#### **4.2.1.2 Experimental and Longitudinal Research on Prayer**

Next, we review longitudinal research on praying, some of which has experimental designs. One study examined cognitions about prayer among older Christian adults in the U.S. (Krause & Hayward, 2013). The results indicated that stronger trust-based prayer beliefs, involving beliefs that God knows when and how to best answer prayer, are associated with a greater sense of life satisfaction over time. Other studies have primarily examined longitudinal links between engaging in prayer and positive relationship outcomes, which we discuss further in Chap. 5.



For example, a recent series of studies has demonstrated the powerful effects of engaging in prayer for positive relationship behaviors, such as cooperating and engaging in forgiveness (Lambert, Fincham, DeWall, Pond, & Beach, 2013). In one study, self-reports of the frequency with which one engaged in partner-focused prayers predicted lower levels of vengefulness toward a romantic partner 3 weeks later, as rated by objective coders observing participants engaging in a discussion with their partner about a recent transgression by the partner. These findings persisted after controlling self-reported relationship satisfaction and communal strength, which refers to the degree of motivation a person has to respond to his or her partner's needs. In another study reported by Lambert et al. (2013), participants indicated their frequency of praying for the well-being of a close friend. Three weeks later they were asked to write about a recent incident when the friend did something to upset or annoy them and how they responded. Objective coders rated these narratives on levels of forgiveness toward the friend. Previous levels of praying for the friend were related to higher forgiveness ratings. Finally, in an experimental study, participants received insulting feedback from a close friend or romantic partner and were then randomly assigned to either engage in partner-focused prayer or to think about God, justice, and religious rules (Lambert et al., 2013). Then, all participants completed a prisoner dilemma game with the relationship partner. Participants who prayed after being insulted by their partner displayed greater cooperative tendencies with their partner in the prisoner dilemma game in comparison to participants who thought philosophically about God and justice.

While this research shows that prayer is associated with positive relationship behaviors, studies have also indicated that prayer for a partner accounts for unique variance in relationship satisfaction beyond the effects of behavior in the relationship (Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, & Braithwaite, 2008). Furthermore, this longitudinal research has shown that it is praying for a relationship partner that predicts later relationship satisfaction, perhaps operating through increased commitment to the relationship, rather than that relationship satisfaction predicts greater prayer (Fincham et al., 2008). In addition, prayer can increase the effectiveness of relationship enhancement programs, at least for wives (Beach et al., 2011).

Among psychological variables, longitudinal research has primarily focused on prayer being associated longitudinally with decreases in negative outcomes, rather than increases in positive outcomes. Prayer has been associated with displaying less anger when provoked (Bremner, Koole, & Bushman, 2011) and with decreases in internalizing problems, such as depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and other forms of psychological distress, among a variety of samples (Ai, Bolling, & Peterson, 2000; Ai et al., 2010; Cruz et al., 2009; Hebert, Dang, & Schulz, 2007; Sun et al., 2012). For example, among 294 patients receiving open-heart surgery, engaging in private prayer preoperatively was associated with better quality of life assessed on the basis of levels of depression, anxiety, and fatigue symptoms 36 days postoperatively. This result occurred through the variables of cognitive coping and perceived social support (Ai, Corley, Peterson, Huang, & Tice, 2009). Thus, prayer may be closely connected to and partially exert positive effects through cognitive



coping methods. Such cognitive coping methods involve making efforts to modify the way one thinks about a situation, such as reminding oneself that things could be worse.

Prayer has also been longitudinally associated with decreased externalizing problems. For example, engaging in prayer is associated with a lower likelihood of developing an alcohol-use disorder (Borders, Curran, Mattox, & Booth, 2010). In addition, among middle school boys, frequency of prayer was associated with less likelihood of becoming sexually active at a young age (Lafin, Wang, & Barry, 2008).

### 4.2.1.3 Summary and Challenges in Research on Prayer

Research on the relationship between prayer and positive psychological outcome measures has, for the most part, indicated small, positive links between prayer and well-being. These links between prayer and positive psychological outcomes likely exist in part through cognitive mechanisms taking place during prayer, including positive appraisals and reinterpetive cognitions that help individuals think about life situations in a new way (Sharp, 2010). As such, Spilka and Ladd (2013) concluded that although prayer has many functions, it is used primarily as a method of coping with problems, which we observed in both the cross-sectional and longitudinal research reviewed in this chapter. Therefore, the literature on prayer fits well within the framework of meaning-making coping, previously discussed in this chapter.

The low magnitude of links between prayer and positive psychological outcome measures may relate to the complexity of prayer and the fact that prayer is embedded in a broad matrix of other religious concepts (Spilka & Ladd, 2013). Prayer is a religious variable that is particularly challenging to examine scientifically. When considering naturally occurring prayer, it is difficult to tease out whether positive outcomes are the result of prayer or some other characteristics of a praying person. In addition, depending on context, assigning prayer experimentally could be questionable, as one might wonder whether experimenter-imposed prayer is in fact true, genuine prayer. Furthermore, it would be ethically questionable to control or limit prayer from occurring naturally in control/comparison conditions. Given that the majority of adults in the U.S. report praying at least once a day (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008), research of experimentally assigned prayer in the U.S. must take this into account. Of course, given initial evidence that assigned prayer has observable effects (e.g., Lambert et al., 2013), it is possible that variance in outcome measures attributable to prayer is large enough to overcome these methodological challenges. Assessing and taking into account prayer that occurs within control and comparison groups may lead to the conclusion that the effects of prayer are even stronger than previously realized. Therefore, experimental research would benefit from quality checks in which experimental participants are asked at the end of a study to report their experience of the assigned prayer and control participants are asked about the nature and amount of prayer they naturally engaged in over the course of the study.

### 4.2.2 *Meditation*

Meditation is a cognitive exercise that originated as a religious and spiritual practice and usually involves an effort to self-regulate or train the mind. For example, mindfulness is a contemplative practice that is most often associated with Buddhism, but is also central to Islamic and Christian traditions (Levenson & Aldwin, 2013). Meditation has been associated with improvements in many aspects of mental and physical health (e.g., Carmody, Reed, Kristeller, & Merriam, 2008; Fortney & Taylor, 2010; Ireland, 2012; Toneatto & Nguyen, 2007), spiritual well-being (Bormann et al., 2005; Carmody et al., 2008), and cognitive functioning (Xiong & Doraiswamy, 2009). As a traditionally faith-based practice, links between meditation and cognitive functioning are of particular relevance to this chapter on cognition. Meditation has been associated with improvements in memory (Horowitz, 2010), working memory capacity (Jha, Stanley, Kiyonaga, Wong, & Gelfand, 2010), attention (Lutz et al., 2009), and other cognitive tasks (Zeidan, Johnson, Diamond, David, & Goolkasian, 2010). For example, May et al. (2011) trained college students in the U.S. in the Buddhist loving-kindness meditation, having them practice for 8 weeks. This meditation focuses on unselfish kindness and warmth towards all people (as discussed in more detail in Chap. 2). When the trained students engaged in loving-kindness meditation immediately prior to an attention task, they displayed increased attention compared to two control groups (one that did not engage in meditation before the task and one that engaged in meditation prior to the task but did not have a history of practicing meditation). Whereas the practice of loving-kindness meditation has typically not been associated with pervasive changes in attention (e.g., Lee et al., 2012), May et al.'s study indicated that loving-kindness meditation may cause a state increase in attention for those who have been practicing the meditation in their lives.

Given that meditation exists in many diverse forms, links between meditation and outcomes will depend on the type of meditation that is examined. It is important to recognize that even though meditation originated from and is steeped in a long history of religious and spiritual practices, much of the research on this topic has employed meditation in a nonreligious fashion to test its effects on outcome variables. Thus, a relevant question is to what extent the religious or spiritual essence of meditation, specifically, is related to positive outcomes. In a review of the literature, Delmonte (1983) concluded that meditation techniques do not need a spiritual connotation to be effective, and that spiritually-based meditation programs did not differ from non-spiritual versions. However, more recent research seems to provide alternative conclusions.

Two forms of meditation that may be particularly relevant as faith practices are loving-kindness meditation and transcendental meditation. Because loving-kindness meditation is an emotion-focused practice, we discussed research on this form of meditation in Chap. 2. A more extensive amount of research has been conducted on transcendental meditation, which is based on the ancient Vedic tradition of enlightenment from India (Maharishi Foundation USA, 2013). Even

though this form of meditation has roots in religious and spiritual teachings, it has been described in both religious and non-religious terms (Wachholtz & Pargament, 2005). Transcendental meditation involves transcending all thoughts by systematically going beyond mental activities in order to experience pure awareness, considered to be a peaceful state of consciousness. A meta-analysis of 18 studies indicated that transcendental meditation promoted self-actualization up to three times more than other meditation and relaxation practices, suggesting that there is something unique about the systematic cultivation of transcendence (Alexander, Rainforth, & Gelderloos, 1991).

We were able to locate a small number of recent studies that compared explicitly spiritual with nonspiritual forms of meditation. For example, Wolf and Abell (2003) recruited 93 adults via newspaper advertisements in the U.S. to participate in daily meditation for 1 month. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups: one group was assigned to chant a faith-based mantra, the Hindu maha mantra; another group was assigned a nonspiritual mantra made up of meaningless combinations of Sanskrit syllables with the same pattern as the maha mantra; and a control group not assigned a meditation. Assignment to the various groups was balanced for previous experience with yoga, bio-feedback, meditation, and chanting. The results indicated that the maha mantra group experienced decreases in stress, depression, and inertia, and increases in enlightenment more than the other groups, suggesting that there is something unique about the spiritual content of meditation.

With a similar research design, Wachholtz and Pargament (2005) randomly assigned 84 college students in the U.S. to meditate on a spiritual phrase, meditate on a secular phrase, or engage in a relaxation activity without a meditative phrase. The assignment of participants to conditions was balanced for perceived positivity toward meditation. After practicing for 20 min a day for 2 weeks, participants using spiritual meditation reported a greater reduction of anxiety compared to those using secular meditation or relaxation techniques. In addition, the spiritual meditation group reported a greater increase in spiritual experiences and more closeness to God than did the members of the other two groups. Finally, at the end of the study, those in the spiritual meditation group were able to tolerate pain almost twice as long as those in the other two groups in a cold water task and reported significantly more positive mood than those in the other groups. In a similar study, 83 migraine sufferers were assigned to one of four groups: a spiritual meditation, internally focused secular meditation, externally focused secular meditation, or muscle relaxation practice for 1 month (Wachholtz & Pargament, 2008). Compared to the other three groups, those who practiced spiritual meditation had greater decreases in the frequency of migraine headaches, anxiety, and negative affect, as well as greater increases in pain tolerance, headache-related self-efficacy, daily spiritual experiences, and existential well-being.

The results of these studies suggest that spiritual meditation facilitates greater psychological, spiritual, and physical benefits than do secular forms of meditation or relaxation. Interestingly, the studies by Wachholtz and Pargament (2005, 2008) also demonstrated that individuals in the secular groups reported increases in

spiritual experiences and well-being over the course of the intervention, raising the question of whether presumably secular techniques are truly devoid of spirituality. Wachholtz and Pargament (2005) concluded that some of the beneficial effects of meditation practiced in nonreligious form may be rooted in spirituality and that, therefore, secular meditation tasks represent less-spiritually oriented, rather than non-spiritually oriented methods. This principle is echoed in other studies in which secular forms of meditation have been associated with increased spirituality, which in turn can be associated with decreases in psychological distress and medical symptoms (Carmody et al., 2008; Geary & Rosenthal, 2011). Based on a review of literature on meditation, Wachholtz and Austin (2013) concluded that meditation as a secular practice is in fact “too closely intertwined with spirituality to be considered completely independent of spiritual constructs” (p. 313). Despite this potential confound, the research literature offers some indication that spiritual meditation practices offer unique positive outcomes from practices that are not spiritually oriented.

### **4.3 Implications**

Positive psychology involves the study of things that make life most worth living (Park, Peterson, & Brunwasser, 2010). The research reviewed in this chapter emphasizes that faith can play an important role in the cognitive process of finding meaning in life and that cognitive faith practices such as prayer and meditation are associated with psychological, emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal benefits.

#### **4.3.1 *Clinical Implications***

The research reviewed in this chapter has direct clinical implications. For the most part, the focus in this chapter has been on forms of faith that build on universal cognitive structures relevant to individuals of any religion. This allows therapists to consider the nature and role of a person’s faith apart from specific belief systems. In addition, the principles can be helpful to those who do not identify as religious at all. Understanding the idiosyncratic cognitive appraisals of clients can facilitate psychotherapists’ understanding of what motivates clients’ behaviors and deepest emotions. As seen in this chapter, faith can be incorporated in growth-oriented models that may be helpful for therapy. For instance, positive spiritual appraisals are associated with investing more of one’s time and resources in meaningful aspects of life, experiencing meaningful emotions, and greater life satisfaction. Furthermore, the role of faith in the process of meaning making in response to trauma and loss should be of particular interest to counselors and psychotherapists, as they are likely to work with individuals in crisis.

According to cognitive theory, it is the content of one's thoughts that forms the link between life experiences and one's emotional and behavioral responses to those experiences (e.g., Abrams & Ellis, 1994). Thus, interpreting events and circumstances on the basis of a spiritual framework can influence a person on emotional, behavioral, and physical levels. We have seen that forming faith-based cognitions can relate to a host of positive outcomes in people's lives. Here, we consider whether this implies that clinicians should recommend clients incorporate such thinking styles into their lives. We would caution mental health professionals to consider two things. First, the research reviewed in this chapter has primarily been conducted among the general population, not specifically among clinical samples or samples of psychotherapy clients. Thus, it is unknown how well we can generalize these findings to those who seek treatment or counseling. Second, the majority of research to date has examined how individuals within their natural environments spontaneously think about themselves, the world, and their circumstances through a faith lens. Much less is known about how *prescribed* faith-based appraisals would function in a person's life. There is at least some indication that spiritual appraisals come naturally to some, but not to others, on the basis of their religious orientation (Hood, Morris, & Watson, 1990).

Therefore, evidence is needed from research in order to understand the implications of clinical interventions that incorporate faith-based cognitive techniques. The studies that have been conducted thus far provide promising results. Pilot studies have been conducted on structured interventions that explicitly incorporate Christian, Jewish, or Buddhist principles into meaning making for a variety of populations, including college students experiencing spiritual struggles (Dworsky et al., 2013), individuals with elevated levels of stress and worry (Rosmarin, Pargament, Pirutinsky, & Mahoney, 2010), female survivors of sexual abuse experiencing spiritual struggles (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005, 2008), adults with addictions (Margolin et al., 2007), adults with HIV (Tarakeshwar, Pearce, & Sikkema, 2005), cancer patients (Cole, 2005), and individuals with social anxiety (McCorkle, Bohn, Hughes, & Kim, 2005). The results of this research indicate that these interventions are associated with a wide range of positive changes, such as increased positive affect, emotional regulation, physical well-being, and spiritual well-being, as well as decreased psychological distress, trauma symptoms, negative affect, depression, anxiety, self-stigmatization, shame, spiritual struggles, pain severity, impulsivity, and substance use (Cole, 2005; Margolin et al., 2007; McCorkle et al., 2005; Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005, 2008; Dworsky et al., 2013; Rosmarin et al., 2010; Tarakeshwar et al., 2005). Furthermore, a meta-analysis has demonstrated that faith-based therapies are moderately effective in the treatment of psychological problems and very effective in promoting well-being (Smith, Bartz, & Richards, 2007). An additional meta-analysis demonstrated that faith-based treatments are equally effective as standard cognitive behavioral therapy in treating depression (McCullough, 1999). Thus, it seems that therapists can incorporate a focus on faith-based cognitions in treatment without the concern of compromising treatment efficacy.

Incorporating a focus on faith-based cognitions seems further warranted by the research on sanctification reviewed in this chapter. Consistent with a positive

psychology approach, therapy can focus on growth by encouraging clients to explore what they have sanctified in their lives, and how they can build these facets into their lives more fully. Therapists can also work constructively with spiritual issues by exploring clients' growth and development in this area through Fowler's faith development model. This can help clients draw on the strengths of their faith stages (Parker, 2011). Work with positive religious reappraisals can be applied when it comes to stressors. Benevolent religious reappraisals provide an opportunity for a client to supply an event with positive spiritual meaning. The research reviewed in this chapter indicates that faith-based cognitive reappraisals are not redundant with secular methods of coping, suggesting that faith-based cognitive reappraisals offer a distinctive dimension to the coping process. Thus, clients may benefit from using a spiritual lens to reinterpret a stressor in a positive light. For example, it is not uncommon for individuals to view a stressor as a part of God's plan or as a way that God is strengthening him or her through the experience, or for people to find a lesson from God through their difficulties (Pargament, 2007). Rather than ignoring or rejecting such thoughts raised by clients, therapists can provide space for clients to explore these rich thought patterns. Religious meaning making can be one way in which clients gain insight into and closure about difficult situations in the therapeutic process (e.g., Exline, Smyth, Gregory, Hockemeyer, & Tulloch, 2005). Finally, we review the clinical application of research indicating that a number of faith-based cognitions and practices are relevant for relationship enhancement and marital conflict resolution in the next chapter. For further reading, resources with useful case applications are available for considering ways in which faith-based cognitions can be incorporated into clinical treatment in ways that respect clients' individual religious beliefs and values (e.g., Aten, O'Grady, & Worthington, 2011; Pargament, 2007; Vasegh, 2011).

### 4.3.2 *A Cautionary Note*

In this chapter, we have reviewed faith-based cognitions and faith-based cognitive practices that are associated with favorable outcomes such as more positive affect, greater well-being, and less distress. However, some longitudinal research has shown no significant relationships between cognitive faith practices such as prayer and positive outcome measures (e.g., Lim & Putnam, 2010; Murphy, Johnson, Lohan, & Tapper, 2002) or relationships that dissolve when controlling other variables (e.g., Levin & Taylor, 1998). Therefore, clinicians should be aware that faith-based cognitions and faith-based cognitive practices may not relate to well-being for all individuals or under all circumstances.

We have seen that some forms of faith are associated with open-mindedness and tolerance for ambiguity (Morton et al., 2006), however, other research has shown the opposite. For example, research in Belgium, a highly secularized country, has indicated that religiosity, conversion to a mainstream religion, and religious fundamentalism are associated with a high need for cognitive closure, involving a

desire for order, predictability, and firm knowledge without ambiguity (Buxant, Saroglou, & Scheuer, 2009; Saroglou, 2002). In addition, as indicated in this chapter, there is a body of research linking aspects of religiosity to higher levels of bias and prejudice against individuals different from oneself. Therefore, it is important to realize that, depending on how variables are operationalized, not all forms of faith are associated with positive cognitive outcomes.

There are additional ways in which faith can be linked to unhelpful cognitions. For example, religious content can be involved in the symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, as is seen in scrupulosity, unwanted and intrusive religious thoughts accompanied by compulsive behaviors (see Himle, Chatters, Taylor, & Nguyen, 2011 for a review). It is also possible for cognitions to take on a negative faith tone. For example, people can interpret experiences as a sacred loss or desecration, people can demonize others or events, or people can form negative conceptualizations of God, such as viewing God as angry, vindictive, or weak. These cognitions are encompassed within the literature on negative religious coping and spiritual struggles, which indicates that they are associated with unfavorable outcomes. For example, appraising divorce as a sacred loss or desecration at the time it occurs can lead to experiencing more depression and dysfunctional conflict tactics with an ex-spouse a year later (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011).

Paradoxically, negative spiritual appraisals have been associated with not only negative, but also positive outcome measures. For example, in one study, those who viewed a negative life experience as a sacred loss experienced more intrusive thoughts and depression, but also more posttraumatic growth and positive spiritual change (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005). Similarly, demonizing the terrorists of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center was associated with more post-traumatic distress symptoms and illness, but also with greater spiritual and psychological growth (Mahoney et al., 2002). Similarly, negative appraisals of God have been related not only to depression, anxiety, distress, lower self-esteem, and declines in physical health (e.g., Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Benson & Spilka, 1973; Exline, 2013; Parenteau et al., 2011; Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2004; Schaap-Jonker, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Verhagen, & Zock, 2000), but also to increased personal growth, sense of purpose in life, and spiritual growth (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Koenig et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 1999, 2000). It seems that negative faith-based cognitions represent arduous struggles that simultaneously become pathways to growth and therefore greater well-being. Perhaps growth results from a process in which those who experienced loss, violation, or struggle on a spiritual level are more deliberate about investing in their lives in positive ways and rethinking their values (Mahoney et al., 2002).

The research literature indicates that, overall, people form more positive than negative faith-based appraisals (e.g., Mickley et al., 1998; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). Nevertheless, the potentially destructive impact of negative faith-based appraisals should not be overlooked. It seems that negative religious cognitions can be particularly damaging to those who are already experiencing distress, as they have been shown to partially mediate the relationship between trauma and PTSD symptoms (Wortmann, Park, & Edmondson, 2011).



## 4.4 Directions for Future Research

Research on faith and cognition has focused primarily on faith-based cognitive appraisals. The knowledge base generated on this topic is of particular interest in relation to its clinical implications. However, more studies are needed that focus specifically on samples of individuals in psychotherapy, and on how clinical interventions employing faith-based meaning making or cognitive faith practices impact well-being. The studies that have been conducted thus far provide promising results; however, few isolate the specific effects of faith-based cognitions or cognitive faith practices. More clinical trials are needed to offer support for efficacy of such interventions. In addition, more research is needed to understand what specifically is effective about faith-based cognitions or practices such as meditation and how they differ from similar, secular cognitions and practices.

There are noteworthy limitations to examining faith from a cognitive perspective. When faith variables are defined on the basis of cognitions, then faith maturity, and thereby the consequences of faith for someone's life, will be dependent on a person's ability or affinity when it comes to complex cognition. Thus, children's ability to engage in religious thinking will depend on their cognitive development (Elkind, 1961, 1962, 1963; Goldman, 1964, 1965). Even among adults there seem to be cognitive differences in the ability to engage in religious thinking. Sinnott (1994) has argued that postformal reasoning is required to achieve greater maturity of faith, because it offers the cognitive tools for responding to the paradoxes presented within the spiritual domain by allowing a person to flexibly draw from multiple forms of reasoning. This would have implications for the faith of adults who do not achieve a state of postformal reasoning. However, empirical support linking postformal thought and mature faith is mixed. Some have found that the complexity of individuals' concepts of God is directly related to their degree of postformal thought (Benovenli, Fuller, Sinnott, & Waterman, 2011) and that greater postformal reasoning is related to greater spiritual maturity (Morton et al., 2006). However, others have found that postformal reasoning is unrelated to a person's conceptualization of God (Griffin et al., 2009). Because postformal reasoning is conceptualized as developing during adulthood, one would expect links between more complex thinking and cognitions about God to result in changes in God concepts during adult development. Research on this is limited, though one study found no age differences among adults in their conceptions of God (Noffke & McFadden, 2001). It should be noted that this could be due to limited emphasis on paradoxical and mysterious aspects of God within the measures, which are the aspects of faith that have been hypothesized to relate most to development of postformal reasoning (Sinnott, 1994). On the other hand, another study indicated that scores for cognitive orientation toward spirituality in general were higher among people in late adulthood than among college students (Heintz & Barušs, 2001).

Regardless of whether mature conceptualizations of God require particularly complex forms of reasoning, it seems intuitive that cognitions about God, as cognitions about any phenomenon, are bound by an individual's general cognitive



abilities. Therefore, models such as Fowler's have been criticized for overreliance on cognitive development (Coyle, 2011). This raises important questions about whether those hampered in the cognitive domain would automatically be hampered in faith development. This point is illustrated by a small, qualitative study of 17 adults with severe and persistent psychiatric disorders (Bussema & Bussema, 2000). Among these individuals, only 23 % of the sample (4 out of 17) were in or transitioning into stage 4 of faith, which Fowler described as being appropriate for the majority of adults. Strong conclusions cannot be drawn given the small sample size, however, the researchers noted that the participants' mental preoccupation with their idiosyncratic thoughts and experiences seemed to undermine their ability to formulate a cognitive belief system that provided meaning in their lives. Furthermore, having a psychiatric disorder may have influenced participants to avoid deep theological questions that can raise struggles about their disorder, such as why a loving God would allow them to have a disorder. The data suggest that because participants tended to avoid reflecting too deeply, they remained in simpler, child-like stages of faith.

Alternatively, it may be that the measures, rather than the participants, were limited in representing complex conceptualizations of God. Thus, another criticism related to this literature is that the measurement tools confine what we can discover about people's conceptualizations of God. In this body of research, participants are typically asked to select from a predetermined set of descriptors of God or Transcendence. Likely, conceptualizations of ultimate reality are more diverse and nuanced than can be assessed in such a format (Kunkel, Cook, Meshel, Daughtry, & Hauenstein, 1999). Therefore, it is unclear how a richer understanding of people's conceptualizations of ultimate Truth would relate to positive outcomes. Thus, there may be both floor and ceiling effects in all studies that focus on cognitive conceptualizations of faith: neither those limited in cognitive ability nor those surpassing the complexity of measurement tools will be accurately represented in such research. For these reasons, there is a need for more complex measurement tools. In addition, there is a need for more longitudinal research and more sophisticated statistical analyses to control for potential extraneous variables.

In addition to cognitive appraisals, there are other facets of cognition that can be explored with regard to faith. While a substantial body of research has indicated that faith is related to better physical functioning and health (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012), research on the relationship between faith and cognitive functioning is extremely limited. Outside of the literature on cognitive faith practices, we were able to locate only one study on how faith in general relates to cognitive functioning. This longitudinal study indicated that higher levels of spirituality and private religious practices were predictive of less cognitive decline among patients with Alzheimer's disease, after controlling baseline levels of cognition, level of education, age, and other demographic factors (Kaufman, Anaki, Binns, & Freedman, 2007). Faith was not a proxy for quality of life in this study, as there was no correlation between rate of cognitive decline and quality of life. Thus, it seems that faith may be able to bolster cognitive functioning among those with Alzheimer's disease. However, much more research is needed to substantiate this possibility, as

well as to understand other relationships that might exist between faith and cognitive functioning. Thus, much more can be explored regarding the role of faith and faith practices in promoting and sustaining cognitive functioning.

Language is another important component of cognition that has rarely been studied in relation to faith. Language is a tool for expressing and storing ideas. To a certain extent, becoming involved in a religion involves learning a new vocabulary or experiencing new meanings for words such as *hope*, *grace*, *communion*, *fellowship*, and *worship*. Even though faith is rooted in and enacted through language, little research has been conducted on the relationship between faith and language, and the implications for positive outcomes. One study has shown that religious training relates to changes in the language that people use (Kim, Jang, Park, & Lee, 2011). However, little is known about how this relates to psychological outcome variables. Thus, there are many research opportunities for exploring how the nature of faith language relates to human flourishing and the cross-religious and cross-cultural implications of this relationship.

Finally, this chapter has focused primarily on conscious forms of faith and cognition. We might note that faith can also operate outside of one's awareness. Wenger (2007) demonstrated in a series of studies that religious pursuits can be activated and operate on implicit levels. Thus, religious goals can be activated without conscious intent, thereby having implicit effects on behavior. Most research on implicit activation of cognition focuses on stereotypes and negative associations. However, Wenger's study suggests that commitment to religious goals can exert an effect at an implicit level of awareness, yielding positive outcomes. More research is needed to evaluate the idea that faith exists in implicit cognitive knowledge structures and how such structures impact functioning and well-being.

## 4.5 Chapter Summary

Cognition is one avenue through which faith has the potential to bring about thriving. In this chapter, we reviewed how faith can influence the content of people's cognitions in vital ways, by providing a meaning system that allows individuals to make sense of the world, as well as a way to interpret events in daily life. Many disciplines in psychology, including positive psychology, emphasize the importance for humans to have a sense of meaning in life. We examined how faith can provide a global sense of meaning through mysticism, belief in a higher power, or through a process of making, maintaining, and transforming meaning throughout the lifespan.

We also reviewed how people use faith in their every-day interpretations of events, relationships, and other aspects of life. The empirical literature indicates that people invest more into aspects of life that they interpret as sacred, as well as derive greater satisfaction and well-being from these aspects of life. Interpreting difficult life events in a more benevolent religious light also has mental and

emotional health benefits and seems to be a powerful form of coping that offers something unique beyond secular forms of coping with stressors. We also reviewed research indicating that specific forms of and orientations to faith are related to decreased prejudice. We also discussed how specific religious beliefs and values can form a basis for combating prejudice and increasing tolerance within cognitive appraisals of other people.

Next, we examined the cognitive nature of two faith practices: prayer and meditation. We reviewed research indicating that prayer and meditation are associated with favorable psychological outcomes. These links may exist in part through cognitive mechanisms taking place during prayer and meditation, including positive appraisals and reinterpretations that help individuals to think about life situations in a new way. However, the benefits do not seem reducible to those gained during secular experiences. For example, some studies have demonstrated that spiritual meditation facilitates greater psychological, spiritual, and physical benefits than do secular forms of meditation or relaxation.

The chapter included a discussion of clinical implications of this body of research. Given that faith-based cognitions relate to a host of positive outcomes in people's lives, clinicians may consider incorporating clients' faith into sessions. We briefly reviewed research on psychotherapy that incorporates faith-based cognitive techniques. These studies have shown promising results. We discussed some of the ways that faith can be incorporated into clinical treatment, as well as some cautions that should be considered when doing so. Much more research should be conducted among psychotherapy clients to explore how clinical interventions employing faith-based meaning making or cognitive faith practices impact well-being.

Moving forward, more research is also needed within the general population to understand specifically how faith-based cognitions and practices relate to positive outcome measures, and how these thoughts and behaviors differ from similar, secular cognitions and practices. Other avenues of future exploration include examining how faith relates to cognitive functioning, language, and implicit knowledge. A greater understanding of how faith might positively influence individual cognition could be applied within the field of positive psychology.

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## Chapter 5

# Faith and Relationships

Positive psychology, as a field, operates not only from an individual framework, but also emphasizes flourishing in relationships. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) originally conceptualized three pillars of the subfield of positive psychology, of which the third pillar included an emphasis on interpersonal relationships in the contexts of groups and society, including families and institutions. Since then, the study of positive relationships has been conceptualized as a fourth pillar of positive psychology (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Furthermore, Seligman, Park, and Peterson's (2004) classification system of human strengths and virtues includes strengths that are interpersonal in nature, such as love and kindness. Clearly, a tenant of positive psychology is that humans need positive interpersonal relationships. This chapter focuses on the role that faith can play in establishing such relationships. The question at hand is how faith variables relate to positive relationships, either directly, or by fostering interpersonal strengths.

As discussed in Chap. 3, both self-report and laboratory studies have shown that religiosity is associated with prosocial attitudes and behavior, such as empathy, altruism, and less aggression (e.g., Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005). These are some of the avenues by which faith might lead to relationships flourishing. In the current chapter, we examine specifically how faith variables relate to positive relationships. As noted in Chap. 1, we use the term *faith* to refer to both religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors that take place within or outside of an institutional context. Research relating faith to relationships has examined traditional faith variables, such as self-reports of one's religion, religious beliefs, engagement in prayer, or religious service attendance. However, quite a bit of the research has also made use of faith variables within a relationship context, such as those in a relationship being similar or different in religious affiliation, religious beliefs about a relationship, praying for a relationship partner, discussing spiritual topics within a relationship, and attending church or engaging in religious activities together. We will examine such faith variables exclusively in research focusing on *relational* outcome measures. We will not review the extensive history of research on faith and rates of family formation,



such as higher rates of getting married, staying married, and having children (see Mahoney, 2010 for a review). Rather, we will consider specifically how faith variables relate to the *quality* of personal relationships, such as relationship partners being loving to one another, providing one another with emotional support, engaging in forgiveness, handling relationship conflicts in beneficial ways, and reporting high levels of relationship satisfaction.

Research on the role of faith in couples and families has become quite common, while research focusing on faith and nonfamilial relationships is still sparse. We will review the quantitative, empirical research relating faith to personal relationships of all kinds, focusing on studies that link faith variables to relationship flourishing. We begin with an overview of the body of research on marriage, parenting, and family life and then turn to research relevant to non-familial relationships. Toward the end of the chapter, we also include a cautionary note that highlights some areas of research where religion has been linked to unfavorable relationship outcomes.

## 5.1 Faith and Marital Relationships

Many empirical studies have related faith to higher levels of marital satisfaction (e.g., Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Dillon & Wink, 2007; Mahoney et al., 1999; Sullivan, 2001; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). Perhaps this is due to the fact that faith variables are associated with better quality marital relationships (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009), greater marital commitment and fidelity (Dollahite & Lambert, 2007; Mahoney et al., 1999), less marital conflict (Curtis & Ellison, 2002), less physical aggression (Ellison & Anderson, 2001), and better conflict resolution (Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002; Gardner, Butler, & Seedall, 2008). In addition, religious individuals report that faith is relevant to all stages of marriage. For example, in a qualitative study of 72 Christian and Jewish couples who had been married longer than 20 years, most (65–70 %) identified that religion was important to their marriage during the early years, the child rearing years, and the recent years (Mackey & O'Brien, 2005). Less than 10 % identified that religion had a negative or mixed effect on the marriage. In this section, we will highlight some of the underlying faith characteristics that contribute to the quality of marital interactions and thereby relate to greater satisfaction within a marriage; these include religious beliefs, engaging in prayer, involvement in a religious community, and engaging as a couple in religious activities.

### 5.1.1 Religious Beliefs

Research has indicated that a range of faith-related beliefs are relevant to the quality of marital relationships, including specific beliefs about the Bible, spiritual

perceptions of the marriage, and whether there are commonalities in faith beliefs for the couple. For example, national data from the General Social Surveys indicate that people's beliefs about the Bible are associated with marital fidelity (Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore, 2007). Compared with those who do not regard the Bible as a sacred text, those who believe the Bible is the literal Word of God are 46 % less likely to report having committed adultery and those who view the Bible as the inspired Word of God are about 28 % less likely to report having engaged in marital infidelity.

One religious belief that can be applied specifically to marital relationships is sanctification. Sanctification involves considering an aspect of life to be sacred and can take both theistic and non-theistic forms. Theistic sanctification of marriage involves viewing the marriage as a manifestation of images, beliefs, or experiences of God. Non-theistic sanctification of marriage does not reference a specific deity, but involves imbuing marriage with divine qualities such as boundlessness, ultimate value, and transcendence. In a study of 97 married couples in the U.S., most sanctified their marriage in some way, perceiving God as active in their marriage and describing their marriage in sacred terms (e.g., transcendent, boundless, blessed, and heavenly; Mahoney et al., 1999). Furthermore, higher levels of marital sanctification were associated with greater marital satisfaction, more perceived benefit from marriage, and more marital commitment. In addition, sanctification was related to better-adjusted marriages, including less marital conflict, less verbal aggression and stalemating, and more effective and collaborative problem solving strategies. Another study found that greater perceptions of sexuality as sanctified predicted greater marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, sexual intimacy, and spiritual intimacy among a sample of newly married individuals (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011).

Perhaps perceiving one's marriage as sanctified mobilizes spiritual resources that benefit the couple. These mechanisms were suggested by a study of 178 married, pregnant couples among whom sanctification of marriage was strongly related to experiencing intense spiritual feelings about the marriage, investing time in spiritually oriented activities together, and accessing religious resources for coping with difficulties in the marriage (Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2009). Such spiritual characteristics are likely to lead to marital benefits. It is relevant to note that participants in studies of sanctification have generally not differed from national norms in degree of religiosity (Hernandez et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 1999, 2009). Furthermore, the links between sanctification of marriage and outcome measures tend to remain significant even after controlling participants' relevant demographic factors, levels of religiousness, frequency of prayer, frequency of religious service attendance, and Bible conservatism, indicating that sanctification of marriage does not merely reflect demographic differences or conventional levels of religiousness (Hernandez et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 1999, 2009).

Beyond the faith beliefs for each partner, it seems that shared religious beliefs are relevant to marital quality, particularly among groups that face challenges in society. Lichter and Carmalt (2009) found among 433 low-income couples that



individual religious beliefs were less important for marital quality than for the couple to share similar beliefs about God's divine plans for them and their relationship. Similarly, a national U.S. study of 2,400 adults with oversampling of ethnic minorities indicated that partner sharing of the same religious beliefs was positively associated with the quality of the marriage relationship (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010).

### **5.1.2 Prayer**

In addition to faith beliefs, faith practices, such as prayer, have been established as relevant to marital outcomes. A number of studies have examined the role of prayer in marriage, including how it relates to positive relationship interactions as well as resolutions to marital problems. Gruner (1985) found among 208 Christian couples that those who more frequently used prayer in connection with problems exhibited better marital adjustment. Lichter and Carmalt (2009) emphasized that a couple praying together is a powerful predictor of marital quality, including higher levels of marital commitment and satisfaction, better communication, healthier conflict behaviors, better conflict resolution, and more emotional support. These findings are not only reported by couples themselves, but also by others who know them. For example, in the National Study of Youth and Religion, Smith and Kim (2003a) examined how a couple's frequency of prayer related to what their 12–14 year-old child reported about the quality of the marriage relationship. For couples who reported praying more frequently, their adolescent children reported that the couple was more loving and affectionate with one another, more encouraging and helpful to one another, more fair and willing to compromise with one another, and less likely to scream at, insult, or criticize one another than what was reported by children about parents who engage in less frequent prayer. These findings persisted when controlling for age, race, sex, biological status of the parents, income, parental education, region, and rural/urban residence.

Butler et al. (2002) explored what may underlie the link between prayer and marital adjustment by surveying the role of prayer in marital conflict for 217 Christian husbands and wives. Participants reported that prayer assisted conflict resolution by lessening emotional reactivity and feelings of contempt, hostility, and enmity. Participants felt that prayer increased positive focus on the relationship, perspective taking, empathy, and commitment to self-change. Prayer also promoted beneficial behaviors toward the partner, including gentle confrontation and nondefensive problem solving. These results suggest that prayer may be beneficial to couples experiencing distress. One study has examined the effects of incorporating prayer into a marriage intervention. Among 393 African American married couples, wives who were randomly assigned to participate in a marital enhancement program that incorporated a focus on prayer experienced better marital outcomes than those who participated in the same relationship enhancement program without a focus on prayer (Beach et al., 2011).

### ***5.1.3 Involvement in a Religious Community***

In addition to private faith practices such as prayer, engagement in public worship services is relevant to the quality of marital relationships. For example, a study of 829 individuals in the Southern U.S. indicated that church attendance is associated with greater marital satisfaction (Goddard, Marshall, Olson, & Dennis, 2012). Some studies have found that links between religious service attendance and perceptions of relationship quality are stronger among men than women (Glenn, 1982; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). Religious participation may benefit relationships through the positive behaviors it encourages and the negative behaviors it discourages. A U.S. national study of 2,034 couples indicated that church attendance among both partners is associated with perceptions of better relationship quality, primarily through interpersonal dynamics that are conducive to good relationships (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). Church attendance was associated with more temperance, more affection, and more supportive behaviors, as well as less hurtful behaviors, less conflict over sexual fidelity, and less domestic violence. Other studies have found similar links between church attendance and behaviors that contribute to happy marriages. For example, a study with a random sample of 179 married couples from a Canadian city indicated that greater church attendance was associated with higher levels of marital commitment (Larson & Goltz, 1989). Similarly, national data from the U.S. General Social Survey indicate that the frequency of religious service attendance is associated with lower odds of infidelity (Burdette et al., 2007).

In addition to self-reported relationship quality, it is valuable to examine what others who observe a couple on a regular basis report. A previously mentioned national study on prayer also examined how a couple's frequency of church attendance related to what their 12–14 year-old child reported about the quality of the marriage relationship (Smith & Kim, 2003a). More frequent church attendance reported by couples was associated with their children reporting that the parents encouraged one another and helped each other more frequently, and were less likely to scream at each other when angry.

### ***5.1.4 Shared Religious Activities***

As previously described, faith-based beliefs and practices are relevant to the quality of marital relationships and thereby also to marriage satisfaction. One of the themes among research on faith and marriage is that a couple's *shared* religious beliefs and experiences are particularly relevant to marital quality. When considering the effects of individual versus joint religious beliefs and activities separately, shared religious beliefs and activities provide a greater contribution to healthy relationships than individual religious beliefs and practices (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). Thus, it seems that individual faith factors are relevant, but that dyadic faith factors are even more beneficial to a marriage. For example, Wilcox and Wolfinger (2008)

found that both partners must attend church frequently in order to experience increases in relationship quality. The shared religious values and activities that have been associated with better quality marital relationships include discussing personal spiritual issues such as God's will or God's role in the marriage, sharing similar beliefs about God's divine plan for the marriage, engaging in devotional activities at home, praying together, attending church together, engaging in religious rituals, celebrating religious holidays, and attending religious education programs or retreats together (Ellison et al., 2010; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Mahoney et al., 1999). Furthermore, marital satisfaction is tied more closely to a couple's perceived meaning of shared spiritual rituals than to the frequency of such rituals (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Marks, 2004).

In addition to religious activity shared between partners in a couple, engaging in religious activities together as a whole family, including children, has also been associated with positive relationship outcomes among couples. Specifically, in families that do something religious together on a more frequent basis, youth in the household report that their parents are more encouraging and helpful to one another, more expressive of love and affection to each other, more fair and willing to compromise when they disagree with each other, and less likely to blame, insult, or criticize each other or scream at each other when angry in comparison to what is reported by youth living in households that do not engage in religious activities together (Smith & Kim, 2003a).

There are numerous possible interpretations of these findings. There is the possibility that shared religious involvement merely captures overlapping interests or values, engagement in pleasurable activities, and shared social networks for a couple; however, faith likely offers some unique benefits in that it allows couples to engage in particularly meaningful rituals together, develop a shared value system, and provide one another with spiritual support (Mahoney et al., 1999). For example, shared faith beliefs and experiences may place God or other sacred values at the heart of the marriage relationship, thereby relating more strongly to dyadic outcome measures such as marital quality and satisfaction than individual faith beliefs and practices that may not usher spiritual matters into the center of the relationship. Shared religious involvement can also provide unique social capital that leads to greater relationship quality by fostering positive behaviors that lead to reciprocity and greater trust in the relationship (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). As such, shared faith involvement seems to elicit a synergistic process resulting in greater relational benefits in comparison to individual faith involvement.

## 5.2 Faith and Parent-Child Relationships

In this section we review research that is relevant to how faith is related to parent-child relationships. Most research in this area has focused on how faith beliefs and practices among parents relate to the quality of parenting and parent-child relationships. However, a few studies have also examined how the faith of youth relates to the quality of parent-child relationships. In addition, recent research has included a

focus on relational faith variables, which seem to be even better predictors of the quality of parent-child relationships than individual faith variables among parents or children. Such relational faith variables involve drawing God or faith directly into the parent-child relationship through conversations, attempts at conflict resolution, and shared religious beliefs and activities. In the following sections, we review each of these areas of research.

### ***5.2.1 Faith Variables Among Parents***

While initial research tended to examine links between religious affiliation and parenting, more recent work has indicated that specific religious beliefs and behaviors are more important than religious affiliation in determining child-rearing practices and the quality of family relationships (Bollinger & Palkovitz, 2003; Petts, 2007). Therefore, rather than focusing on the religious labels that individuals use to identify themselves, we focus in this section on faith variables that provide greater depth of information about an individual, such as the specific religious beliefs a person holds and the religious and spiritual practices in which he or she engages. We include a focus on how faith relates to parenting for those who face poverty and other stressors in their families.

#### **5.2.1.1 Religious Beliefs**

Religious beliefs have been associated with favorable parenting practices across numerous studies involving both parent and youth reports. In a study of 2,560 5th through 9th grade boys and girls and their parents in U.S. households identifying with a Christian denomination, parents' beliefs about God were predictive of youth's perceptions of their parents' parenting style (Hertel & Donahue, 1995). Specifically, fathers and mothers who viewed God as loving to a greater extent were viewed by their children as more loving, regardless of the child's age or the family's religious affiliation, frequency of church attendance, or social class. However, the same was not true for strictness. Parents' beliefs about God being restrictive and punitive were only weakly and inconsistently related to children's images of their mothers and fathers being restrictive and punitive.

In addition, research with large national U.S. samples has indicated that conservative Christian beliefs are associated with some favorable parental interactions with children. Specifically, a belief that the Bible is God's true word and that it has answers to important human problems is associated with a greater propensity among parents to praise and hug their children (Wilcox, 1998) and a lower propensity to yell at their children (Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000).

Religious beliefs specific to parenting are able to predict disciplinary practices even better than general religious beliefs. Sanctification of parenting (i.e., the belief that parenting holds spiritual significance) has been associated with increased consistency in responding to child misbehavior and less use of verbal aggression

by mothers (Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006), as well as increased frequency of praising a child's behavior and character and emphasizing the importance of moral responsibility by both fathers and mothers (Volling, Mahoney, & Rauer, 2009). Among a sample of 149 ethnically and economically diverse parents of preschoolers (mostly mothers), greater sanctification of parenting was associated with greater investment in parenting, sharing more positive memories with one's child, and having a greater emotional tie with one's child (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006).

A more complex picture emerges when considering corporal punishment. Whereas sanctification of parenting is associated with less corporal punishment among mothers with liberal Christian beliefs, it is associated with more corporal punishment among mothers with conservative Christian beliefs (Gershoff, Miller, & Holden, 1999; Murray-Swank et al., 2006). Interestingly, longitudinal data has also indicated that the adverse effects of corporal punishment on children do not seem to be present for children of conservative Christian mothers as they are for children whose mothers are of other or no religious affiliation (Ellison, Musick, & Holden, 2011). In fact, for children from conservative Protestant backgrounds, spanking was actually associated with lower levels of adjustment difficulties among children over a 5-year period. This could relate to corporal punishment being problematic particularly when children experience spanking as an expression of parental rejection or withdrawal of affection, whereas corporal punishment could be considered an indicator of parental involvement, commitment, and concern within conservative Christian culture (Ellison et al., 2011; Gershoff et al., 1999). These findings illustrate the importance of considering moderating factors for understanding links between faith and the parenting of children.

In addition to the content of religious beliefs, such as sanctification, one's specific cognitive approach to religious beliefs is also relevant to parenting. Among a large sample of high school students and their parents in Belgium, parents interpreting religious content symbolically rather than literally was associated with positive parenting qualities on the basis of both parent and adolescent reports (Duriez, Soenens, Neyrinck, & Vansteenkiste, 2009). Specifically, a greater degree of symbolic interpretation of faith was associated with parents being supportive of their adolescent children, being supportive of their independence, and exerting little psychological control over them. A symbolic approach to faith was also related to promoting intrinsic rather than extrinsic goals among the adolescents, meaning that parents emphasized the importance of developing oneself, contributing to one's community, and building friendships over the importance of financial success and physical attractiveness.

### 5.2.1.2 Prayer

In parallel to the research we have described on faith variables predicting children's evaluations of their parent's marital relationship, Smith and Kim (2003b) used national U.S. data to examine how parents' faith variables relate to the quality of

parent-child relationships, as reported by 12–14 year-old children. They found that youth whose parents reported praying more than once a day were more likely to report that they enjoy spending time with their parents, experience their parents as more supportive, admire their mothers, always garner praise from their mothers for doing well, and receive help from their fathers to do the things that are important to them in comparison to youth for whom parents did not report praying on a daily basis. In addition, among parents who pray, youth are more likely to report that their parents are involved with their education and are more likely to know their friends' parents. These findings persisted even after controlling for the possible influence of eight different demographic and socioeconomic factors (age, sex, race, presence of both biological parents in the household, income, region, rural versus urban residence, and parental education). Furthermore, the fact that there are separate reporters in this study for engaging in prayer (i.e., the parents) and family relationship variables (i.e., the youth) minimizes concerns about social desirability responding found in some research where those who report higher levels of religiousness may feel compelled to report overly positive relationship dynamics. Nevertheless, the data remains cross-sectional. What is clear is that adolescents whose parents pray on a daily basis seem to have more positive relationships with their parents than adolescents whose parents do not pray at least once a day. Various causal influences could be at work here, including that engaging in prayer improves parent-child relationships and/or that parents who pray also choose to become more involved in their children's lives in positive ways.

### 5.2.1.3 Involvement in a Religious Community

Involvement in a religious community has been associated with numerous positive parenting qualities. For example, Smith and Kim (2003b) found that more frequent church attendance reported by parents was associated with their 12–14 year-old children being more likely to report that they admire their fathers, experience their fathers as more supportive, that their fathers are more involved in their education and more likely to keep the plans they have scheduled with them, that their mothers always give them praise for doing well, and that their parents know their friends' parents and know who they are with when they're not at home.

In a longitudinal study, Clydesdale (1997) examined how changes in religious service attendance among fathers and mothers in the baby-boom generation related to involvement with their school-aged children. Over one-third of the sample declined in frequency of church attendance during the 17-year study, whereas only 4 % increased in church attendance. Of the 541 individuals with school-aged children at the final assessment point, those who were regular church attenders over the course of the study were twice as likely to be involved in their children's education than those whose church attendance had declined over time. Thus, remaining involved in a religious community was associated with being more active in matters at the children's school, regardless of specific religious beliefs and demographic characteristics. Finally, research has also shown that church

attendance is associated with a lower likelihood of parental physical abuse of children (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998). This was indicated on the basis of both official records and retrospective self-reports among a representative sample of 644 families in upstate New York who were followed for 18 years.

Several additional studies on church attendance and parenting have been conducted specifically among fathers. A study of 65 fathers indicated that fathers who were church members were significantly more involved with their children than fathers who were not members of a church (Bollinger & Palkovitz, 2003). A larger study of 3,124 fathers interviewed shortly after the birth of a child and again 12–18 months later indicated that frequency of religious service attendance at the time of the birth was positively associated with paternal engagement a year later (Petts, 2007). Paternal engagement included the frequency with which fathers played games such as peekaboo, sang songs or nursery rhymes, and read stories to their child. Fathers who attended religious services at least several times per month reported the highest frequency of engagement with their children. Fathers with low levels of religious participation were similar to those who never attend religious services with regard to parental engagement. Furthermore, the relationship between religious participation and fathers' engagement was not mediated by pro-fathering attitudes or family structure, including number of children, resident status, or relationship status. Thus, religious participation seems to be a powerful factor in fathering regardless of parenting attitudes or family circumstances.

National samples with greater than 1,000 participants have indicated that religious participation is predictive of favorable parenting practices among fathers of school-aged children as well (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Wilcox, 2002). In one study, frequency of church attendance was a strong predictor of paternal supervision and affection and a modest predictor of more frequent father-child interactions (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000). Specifically, church attendance was related to more involvement in setting rules and monitoring children's behavior, more frequently praising and hugging children, and more frequent interactions between fathers and their children. In another large-scale study, religious attendance of fathers was not predictive of more frequent one-on-one parent-child interactions, but was predictive of greater paternal involvement in youth-related activities 5 years later (Wilcox, 2002). In both studies, links between religious attendance and favorable parenting were robust even when controlling for various characteristics such as levels of paternal commitment, childrearing values, family attitudes, family structure, paternal employment, and civic engagement. These findings again suggest that the effect of church attendance on positive parenting is not simply a consequence of conventional attitudes or lifestyles.

#### **5.2.1.4 The Role of Faith in Parenting for Families Facing Stressors**

A few studies have indicated that a combination of traditional faith variables such as church attendance, prayer, and importance of religiosity bolster parenting practices and child outcomes among families that face internal (e.g., divorce) and



external (e.g., poverty) family stressors. For example, faith has been shown to enhance connections between fathers and their children after a divorce. A nationally representative random-digit-dial sample of 163 fathers indicated that those who scored higher on six dimensions of religiousness were more involved with their children and reported higher quality relationships with their children after the divorce, even after controlling demographic and background factors such as traditional attitudes (King, 2003). Interestingly, three of the examined dimensions of religiousness (importance of religiosity, having a religious preference, and believing religious instruction is important for children) were much more predictive of the quality of the post-divorce relationship than three others (seeking religious comfort, identification with a particular religious group, and church attendance). This suggests that certain aspects of faith may directly enhance a father's ties to his children after divorce.

Several studies have examined the role of faith for low-income families with infants or young children (Cain, 2007; Letiecq, 2007; Roggman, Boyce, Cook, & Cook, 2002; Strayhorn, Weidman, & Larson, 1990). A longitudinal study indicated that levels of religious commitment and motivation and engaging in private religious practices such as prayer, meditation, and Bible study positively influenced parenting practices among urban African American mothers (Cain, 2007). The women were interviewed within 36 h of the birth of an infant and again 6 months later, and participated in a structured in-home observation. Higher religious commitment and motivation and more private religious practices were associated with the mothers being more involved with their 6-month-olds, being more emotionally and verbally responsive to them, and providing them with more quality learning materials, even after accounting for the parenting interactions that took place soon after the birth and while controlling level of income and other demographic characteristics. Interestingly, this study did not find links between religious variables and parenting stress, perhaps due to the limited variance in levels of parenting stress within the sample (84 % reported normative stress levels). This finding perhaps even bolsters the meaningfulness of the links between faith variables and the quality of parenting, in that the mothers did not seem to view parenting through rose-colored glasses or respond to the stress measure in socially desirable ways. Similar findings have been observed among fathers of infants. Among a predominantly Caucasian sample of low-income fathers, being actively involved in religion and drawing on spiritual support were related to being more involved with their infants and participating more frequently in activities such as reading or telling stories, feeding, and playing (Roggman et al., 2002).

A study of African American fathers of children in the Head Start Program, a U.S. federal education program for low-income preschoolers, indicated that self-rated importance of faith was associated with many positive parenting practices (Letiecq, 2007). Fathers who placed greater importance on religion/spirituality were more likely than their less religious counterparts to engage in protective practices to keep their children safe from community violence. They were more likely to monitor their preschoolers, teach them personal safety and neighborhood survival skills, and engage in community activism. Fathers who placed greater



emphasis on faith were more likely to use authoritative parenting styles and less likely to use authoritarian and permissive parenting styles than fathers who reported that faith was less important. That is, spiritual fathers were more democratic and easy going in their parenting style, whereas less spiritual fathers were more likely to employ non-reasoning or punitive parenting practices and to lack follow-through and self-confidence in their parenting. Similarly, among predominantly African American mothers of preschoolers in the Head Start Program, a broad range of faith variables, including self-rated religiosity, attending religious services, prayer, religious goals, the nature of relationship to God, and seeking help from God, was associated with more favorable parenting practices (Strayhorn et al., 1990). Even though there were links based on these self-reported parenting practices, no significant links were found between faith and researchers' observational ratings of parenting. This raises questions about whether faith variables may be associated with parents emphasizing certain parenting practices more, rather than differences in actual behaviors. However, it should be noted that the researchers' observations were based on 25-min videotaped parent-child interactions, which may not have been a sufficient measure of parenting practices. With a better basis of observation of parenting, it is possible that links to faith would have been present.

Thus, the majority of research indicates that faith variables among parents predict favorable parenting practices. As might be expected, research also indicates that this, in turn, relates to greater well-being among children. For example, among those in a sample of low-income children without a history of maltreatment, parents reporting higher importance of faith was associated with lower levels of child externalizing and internalizing symptomatology, and parents reporting higher frequency of church attendance was associated with lower levels of internalizing symptomatology among the children, all on the basis of observational ratings (Kim, McCullough, & Cicchetti, 2009). Interestingly, parents' religiosity exerted stronger protective effects on children who personally reported low levels of importance of faith and church attendance. Therefore, faith among parents seems to impact children, regardless of the child's personal faith experience. Parents' religious beliefs and behaviors may have protective effects against child symptomatology in part because greater religiosity among parents is related to valuing tradition and conformity, whereby parents exert clearer expectations for their children's behaviors (Duriez et al., 2009).

### ***5.2.2 Faith Variables Among Children***

As we have just seen, many studies focusing on parent-child relationships emphasize the role of the parent's faith. However, it is important to realize that the faith of children and adolescents also impacts family life. A study conducted in Germany, for example, indicated that it is not only the case that parents' values impact those of their children, but the reverse is also true (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004). Surveys completed by 431 mother-child dyads and 346 father-child dyads showed that

values regarding whether it is important to believe in God were transmitted from adolescents to their fathers and mothers over a 1-year period.

A few studies have examined how faith among youth (primarily adolescents) is linked to the quality of parent-child interactions. Two large national studies in the U.S. followed adolescents over time and found that their religious faith had positive effects on family relationships (Muller & Ellison, 2001; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006). Muller and Ellison found that frequency of religious service attendance, participation in religious activities, and self-rated religiosity among 10th grade students was predictive of these students talking with their parents more frequently about their school experiences, parents having higher educational expectations of their children, and parents being more involved in their children's social lives 2 years later. Thus it seems that faith among adolescents predicts positive characteristics in the parent-child relationship that are initiated by both the adolescent and the parents.

In a similar study, self-rated importance of religion among adolescents, but not religious service attendance, was related to improvements in family relationships (Regnerus & Burdette, 2006). Adolescents whose religious salience increased over the course of the study showed improved relationship quality with their fathers and mothers over time. Specifically, these adolescents experienced increased satisfaction with communication with their parents. They also experienced increased satisfaction with the overall relationship with their parents, reporting increased feelings of closeness, care, love, and warmth.

Thus, these studies indicate that faith among adolescents is an important factor in family relationships. Self-rated religiosity seems to be a particularly salient factor, as this was a significant predictor in both studies, whereas only one of the studies found that adolescents' participation in religious services was predictive of parent-child relationships. Religious salience may be a more relevant measure than religious practices among adolescents because it taps adolescents' personal values, whereas religious participation may at times reflect family expectations (e.g., attending church together).

### **5.2.3 *Relational Faith Variables***

We have seen that numerous faith variables among both parents and children, such as importance of religion, religious beliefs, involvement in a religious community, and prayer, are linked to the quality of parenting and parent-child relationships. A few studies have gone beyond such traditional markers of faith to examine faith variables that are relational in nature, which may be more powerful than individual measures of faith in predicting the quality of relationships. For example, Lichter and Carmalt (2009) discovered that parents who share religious beliefs, engage in joint religious activities, and view God as central to their marriage, perceive greater commitment from their spouse with regard to their children. Furthermore, research has indicated that children benefit more when parents share the same faith

commitment. On the basis of both parent ratings and teacher ratings of children, Bartkowski, Xu, and Levin (2008) found that parents' church attendance had a multiplicative effect on their children's well-being that was not reducible to either mothers' or fathers' church attendance. That is, both parents frequently attending worship services seems to benefit children most, as opposed to merely having parents who are similar to one another in religiosity or levels of church attendance.

In addition, parents and children interacting together around topics of faith has been shown to be relevant to flourishing families and children. Data from the National Study of Youth and Religion indicated that youth are more likely to report a host of positive family outcomes if they engage in religious activities together with their families, such as going to church, praying, or reading scriptures together (Smith & Kim, 2003b). This included the youth reporting that they enjoy spending time with their parents, admire their parents, always receive help from their parents on things that are important to them, garner praise from their parents for doing well, experience their parents as supportive, and perceive their parents as keeping the plans they have scheduled with them. In addition, for families that are religiously active together, youth are more likely to report that their parents know about their close friends, their friends' parents, and who they are with when they are not at home. Finally, in religiously active families, youth are more likely to report that their parents are involved in their education.

Other studies have examined how discussing spiritual beliefs and practices and drawing God into conflict resolution strategies are linked to the quality of relationships between children and their parents. Frequent parent-child discussions about religion are associated with positive effects on child development (Bartkowski et al., 2008). Spiritual disclosure, the mutual discussion of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, is also a predictor of better relationship functioning between young adults and their parents. In a study of 300 college students and 130 of their mothers, for example, greater spiritual disclosure was related to higher relationship satisfaction, greater use of collaborative conflict resolution strategies, less dysfunctional communication patterns, less verbal aggression, and increased general disclosure in the relationship (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008). Among this sample, spiritual disclosure seemed to function as a component of general disclosure in the relationship. An exception was that spiritual disclosure was unique from general disclosure in predicting conflict resolution strategies. Specifically, the ability to nondefensively express oneself and listen openly to the other's point of view when discussing a conflict was consistently tied to greater spiritual disclosure, after taking into account general self-disclosure. Thus, the more college students and their mothers were able to discuss their faith in depth, the better they could collaboratively discuss conflicts and disagreements in their relationship.

In a similar study of 454 college students and 76 of their fathers, spiritual disclosure was associated with greater relationship satisfaction, higher levels of open family communication, and greater intrapersonal religiousness and spirituality. In this case, links between spiritual disclosure and the quality of the parent-child relationship went beyond the influence of general openness in family communication and relationship satisfaction (Brelsford, 2010).

In both studies involving mothers and fathers, spiritual disclosure between parent and child was predictive of relationship quality after accounting for demographic characteristics and intrapersonal religious characteristics including frequency of prayer and church attendance and self-rated importance of religion and spirituality. Thus, this relational measure of faith is a more powerful predictor of relationship quality than general religious characteristics. In addition, the link between spiritual disclosure and healthier parent-child relationships persisted regardless of whether the parent and child were very religious, and regardless of whether the parent and child were similar to one another in their levels of religious commitment and involvement. It is unclear from these cross-sectional studies, however, whether engaging in spiritual disclosure leads to better quality relationships, or whether better relationships encourage more spiritual disclosure between parents and their young adult children.

In addition to spiritual disclosure, theistic mediation is a relational faith variable relevant to parent-child relationships (Butler & Harper, 1994). Theistic mediation involves drawing God or one's faith into a relationship in a neutral manner in an attempt to resolve a problem. For example, the dyad may confirm that God wants them to find a solution together, ask God to help them understand each other, and ultimately turn the situation over to God. Two recent research studies have indicated that this is a helpful approach that allows for constructive conflict resolution. Theistic mediation has been linked to greater self-disclosure, more frequent use of collaboration strategies to resolve conflict, and greater relationship satisfaction for young adults and their mothers (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009). Theistic mediation is also related to greater relationship quality and relationship satisfaction among young adults and their fathers, even after controlling use of constructive conflict resolution strategies in the relationship (Brelsford, 2011). In addition to controlling demographic factors, both of these studies controlled traditional markers of religiousness, indicating again that relational faith variables are better predictors of relationship quality than are more general faith characteristics. These initial studies indicate that theistic mediation is associated with the favorable outcomes of parents and children being able to discuss sensitive topics, non-defensively express themselves, and listen openly to each other when discussing a conflict.

### 5.3 Faith and Family Functioning

In addition to bolstering marriage and parent-child relationships, faith has been linked to overall family functioning and levels of satisfaction with family life. Abbott, Berry, and Meredith (1990) made use of a stratified random sample of individuals in two metropolitan areas representing the top 20 religious denominations in the U.S. The vast majority of respondents (75 %) reported that religion was helpful to their family life and only 2 % reported that religion had some negative effects on family life. This study focused on the role of various aspects of faith for family life. A particularly applied measure of faith for family life was the extent to which the parents sought

divine intervention for family problems and the extent and nature of supernatural assistance they received. Higher scores for divine intervention were associated with higher levels of satisfaction with family life and relationships, greater satisfaction with the cohesion and adaptability of the family, and better emotional quality of the home environment. Families with higher divine intervention scores experienced a higher degree of commitment, help, and support from one another, more openness in behaviors and expressing feelings, and lower levels of conflict.

In addition, Abbott and colleagues (1990) discovered that some faith variables were related to family strengths, specifically among families with adolescents rather than younger children in the home. For families with adolescents, being part of a religion that teaches family values was predictive of greater family cohesion and adaptability. Also, for families with adolescents, participating together in religious activities predicted greater satisfaction with family life and relationships. This is similar to Regnerus and Burdette's (2006) finding that higher self-rated importance of religion among adolescents was related to improved overall relationships in their families and improved family satisfaction over time. This included adolescents experiencing increased feelings that their family members understood them and paid attention to them, and that the family had fun together. The family benefits associated with religious salience among adolescents were not attributable to heightened autonomy among the adolescents. In addition, the positive effects related to faith among adolescents were not mitigated by behavioral changes that had overall negative effects on family relationships, including drug and alcohol use and minor delinquency among the adolescents. Thus, religiosity among adolescents seems to offer benefits to family relationships and adolescents' levels of satisfaction with their families.

In addition to the faith lives of adolescents, the faith behaviors of parents are relevant to healthy family functioning. Families in which the parents frequently attend worship services and families in which all the family members engage in religious activities together are more likely to participate in recreational events together such as playing a game, attending a sporting event, or swimming (Smith & Kim, 2003b). They are also more likely to eat dinner together as a family every day of the week. In addition, youth whose parents frequently attend worship services are less likely to run away from home than youth from families that attend church less often.

Another domain of family life that relates to faith is the achievement of work-family balance. Often, parents must make difficult decisions about devoting time and attention to work or family in situations where they cannot devote the preferred amount of time and attention to both. General Social Survey data indicated that frequency of church attendance for both mothers and fathers reduced their likelihood of making family trade-offs, in that they were less likely to miss a family event to meet work demands (Ammons & Edgell, 2007). For men but not women, church attendance was associated with making work trade-offs, in that they were more likely to cut back on hours at work to meet family demands. Thus, the fact that faith commitments make it more likely that parents prioritize the needs of the family above work needs may be one explanatory factor of the links between faith and family satisfaction.

## 5.4 Faith and Non-familial Relationships

The vast majority of research on faith and relationships has been conducted in the context of marriages and families. Nevertheless, we were able to locate some research examining faith variables in other relationships. Next, we review research on romantic relationships and friendships and then consider a study of general relationship characteristics, outside of the context of a specific relationship.

### 5.4.1 *Romantic Relationships*

The non-familial relationship studied most commonly in relation to faith is romantic relationships. This research has been conducted primarily among college students in dating relationships. The role of faith in romantic relationships depends in part on whether partners share the same faith. Those in a romantic relationship with someone of the same faith are more likely to report that exchanging faith-related values with their partner helps their relationship grow, in comparison to those in romantic relationships with someone of a different faith (Reiter & Gee, 2008). Further, among partners with different faiths, higher levels of open communication about faith and higher levels of religious support from the partner are associated with lower levels of relationship distress.

A series of studies of college students conducted by Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, and Braithwaite (2008) indicated that praying for a romantic partner is related to positive change in the relationship. Longitudinal data indicated that praying for one's partner predicted later relationship satisfaction. Another study in this series revealed that prayer for the partner specifically, rather than prayer in general, was predictive of increases in relationship satisfaction (Fincham et al., 2008). Furthermore, praying for one's partner was related to more positive relationship interactions such as having fun together, greater willingness to sacrifice for the partner, and more frequent forgiving of the partner. Finally, praying for one's partner was associated with greater relationship satisfaction, even after accounting for positive and negative behaviors taking place within the relationship.

Other research has shown that faith predicts not only increases in positive attitudes and behaviors in romantic relationships, but that it also predicts decreases in negative behaviors. For example, Lambert, Fincham, DeWall, Pond, and Beach (2013) found that self-reports of the frequency with which undergraduate students prayed for their romantic partners predicted lower levels of vengefulness toward the romantic partners 3 weeks later, as rated by objective coders observing participants engaging in a discussion with their partner about a recent transgression (Lambert et al., 2013). These findings persisted after controlling self-reported relationship satisfaction and degree of motivation to respond to the partner's needs.

It seems that links between faith and relationship satisfaction relate not only to relationship behaviors, but also to relationship commitment. In fact, Fincham et al. (2008) found that levels of commitment to the relationship completely accounted for the association between praying for one's partner and relationship satisfaction. Thus, it may be that praying for one's partner primes a longer-term perspective, increasing relationship commitment and thereby leading to greater satisfaction. Next, we turn to the role of faith in friendships.

### **5.4.2 Friendships**

An early study among *Zambian* undergraduate students indicated that faith was a relevant factor in the formation of friendships (Bloom, 1971). Religion was a common response given when students in this small study were asked to describe the reasons that their closest friendships developed. In fact, religion was named as being important to the formation of friendships more often than tribe or language.

A handful of subsequent studies have examined how faith relates to the quality of friendships, showing links across the lifespan. For example, a study of a representative sample of approximately 200 individuals in the United States who were followed from childhood to late adulthood revealed that religious participants tended to have closer emotional ties with friends than nonreligious participants (Dillon & Wink, 2007). This could relate to the fact that religious involvement has been associated with stronger social networks between the families of friends. A study of 20,475 adolescents indicated that greater involvement in church and youth group activities was related to adolescents' parents knowing the friends of their children better and being in more frequent contact with the parents of their children's friends (Glanville, Sikkink, & Hernández, 2008).

The role of faith in strengthening friendships may also relate to the behaviors that take place within the friendship, including levels of personal disclosure and forgiveness. Among adolescents, having a dynamic, personal relationship with God has been associated with more comfort in discussing religion and spirituality with friends and doing so more often (Desrosiers, Kelley, & Miller, 2011). It is possible that adolescents who are more involved with their faith are more likely to cultivate interpersonal relationships that embody and reflect their experience of spiritual love and connection through spiritual discussions. Brelsford, Marinelli, Ciarrochi, and Dy-Liacco (2009) have further examined the role of spiritual disclosure among adults, involving the degree to which individuals talk about their religious or spiritual beliefs and practices in their personal relationships. Higher levels of spiritual disclosure in close friendships were tied to higher levels of generativity, involving greater concern for others, teaching and passing on knowledge, and leaving a legacy for the next generation. These qualities could, in turn, lead to stronger friendships. Other research has shown that faith is associated with more

sharing and support of a general nature in same-gender adult friendships. A study of 171 African American men indicated that higher spirituality was related to greater likelihood of sharing feelings with male friends as well as higher perceived support received from male friends (Mattis et al., 2001).

In addition to personal sharing and support, faith variables have also been related to forgiveness in friendships. For example, in one longitudinal study, college students reported on their frequency of praying for the well-being of a close friend and 3 weeks later wrote about how they responded to a recent incident when the friend did something to upset or annoy them (Lambert et al., 2013). Objective coders rated these narratives on levels of forgiveness toward the friend. Previous levels of praying for the friend were related to higher forgiveness ratings. These findings persisted after controlling self-reported relationship satisfaction and degree of motivation to respond to the partner's needs, known as communal strength. In fact, praying for the friend was a much stronger predictor of forgiveness than was either relationship satisfaction or communal strength.

### ***5.4.3 Faith and Orientation to Relationships***

Whereas links between faith and relationships have mostly been studied in the context of specific relationships, such as marriages or family relationships, Simpson, Newman, and Fuqua (2008), took a different approach by examining how a person's orientation to faith relates to his or her general orientation to relationships. Making use of principle component analyses of ten common spirituality measures and seven common relationship scales, they found among a sample of Christian adults that the measures could be summarized by two components for spirituality, consisting of a positive relationship with God and an instrumental relationship with God, and one component for relationships reflecting negative relationships with others. A regression analysis indicated that the spirituality components accounted for approximately 35 % of the variance in the quality of people's relationships. Specifically, having a positive relationship with God, characterized by a satisfying and stable internal awareness of God's involvement in one's life, predicted lower levels of negative relationships with others. However, taking a utilitarian approach to God by focusing primarily on gaining intrapersonal and interpersonal security through one's relationship with God, predicted more negative relationships with others that were characterized by fear and avoidance of intimacy, difficulty trusting, loneliness, and general dissatisfaction in relationships. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that, at least for Christians, the quality of one's relationships with others is associated with the nature of one's relationship with God. Perhaps this is because dimensions such as trust, intimacy, and attachment that are at the heart of the quality of one's relationships with people are also present in one's relationship with God.



## 5.5 Possible Mechanisms for Links Between Faith and Relationships

As noted, the general trend in research on faith and relationships is that faith is associated with positive relationship outcomes. It is clear from the many demographic, individual, and social variables entered as controls within the research summarized in this chapter that the link between faith and relationships cannot easily be explained on the basis of other, nonreligious or nonspiritual factors. For example, Dillon and Wink's (2007) in-depth examination of the lives of 200 people followed from childhood through late adulthood showed that the links between faith and relationships did not diminish when controlling for a host of demographic characteristics, physical health, and mental health, suggesting that the relationship experiences of religious individuals cannot easily be explained by nonreligious factors. Yet, it is useful to consider precisely how faith variables relate to better quality relationships, whether that is through a particular aspect of faith or a closely associated mechanism. There are many possible reasons for the links between faith and relational flourishing; here we briefly consider a few.

### 5.5.1 *Relationship Values*

One clear connection between faith and relationship flourishing is that relationships are often highly esteemed within religions. Therefore, being part of a religious tradition often means being immersed in a set of beliefs and values that promote strong relationships and attempt to protect relationships from harm. For example, being part of a faith community can elicit the formation of specific cognitive frameworks that influence relationship interactions. While little empirical research is available about the relationship between faith-based cognitive frameworks and relationship outcomes, some inferences may be drawn from the work of Sherkat and Ellison (1997) who have examined moral absolutism and beliefs in the threat of social contamination as cognitive structures that promote antagonism to pornography within Conservative Protestant communities. While the effects of pornography on relationship quality has been debated by scientists and the general public (Hald, Seaman, & Linz, 2014), there is at least some indication that it can have negative effects on marriage and family life (e.g., Manning, 2006) and intimate relationships (based on a meta-analysis including nine studies; Oddone-Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2000). Presumably, the cognitive structures studied by Sherkat and Ellison (1997) would be relevant to opposition to other behaviors that might damage relationships, such as extra-marital affairs. Moral absolutism is defined as a cognitive stance whereby Biblical injunctions prohibiting negative social behaviors are sufficient to motivate opposition to such behaviors; beliefs in the threat of social contamination involves Biblical images and teachings promoting a view of sin as contagious and harmful to others. Moral absolutism and beliefs in the treat of social

contamination are examples of cognitive resources promoted within certain religious contexts that encourage relationship values that have the potential to protect relationships from harm.

### **5.5.2 Social Support**

Because most religions highly value relationships, involvement in a faith community tends to provide social support for relationships (e.g., Myers, 2000). Many religious communities offer programs aimed at promoting strong relationships, including workshops and classes focused on creating healthy interpersonal boundaries, strengthening marriages, and learning healthy parenting skills. For example, Marriage Encounter is a Roman Catholic program that stems back to 1952 that is aimed at enriching marriages through weekend workshops that occur in a group setting. Similarly, parents with higher levels of religiosity report greater social support from friends, which is consistent with involvement in a religious organization as a source of social support (e.g. Strayhorn et al., 1990). In general, religious communities provide a source of social contact, offering opportunities to form and strengthen friendships. In addition, many religious communities offer support in the face of relationship distress. For example, many religious leaders are available to counsel couples and families and some places of worship provide counseling centers with psychologists on staff. What is unique about these faith-based support systems, is that they offer a social dimension while also taping into a source of support that is perceived as even greater – that from a Higher Power.

### **5.5.3 Spiritual Resources**

In addition, faith values, beliefs, and practices can offer people specific spiritual resources to facilitate positive interactions in their relationships. For example, as we discuss in Chap. 3, faith has been linked to forgiveness in numerous ways (Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, Gartner, & Worthington, 2012). In fact, viewing forgiveness as spiritually important promotes greater forgiveness (Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, & Worthington, 2012) and viewing the transgressor of an offense as spiritually similar to oneself also promotes greater forgiveness (Davis, Worthington, Hook, Van Tongeren, Green, & Jennings, 2009). Both of these faith characteristics could therefore facilitate reconciliation within relationships. Other relationship resources associated with faith behaviors, such as prayer, include perspective taking, empathy, gentle confrontation, and nondefensive problem solving (Butler et al., 2002). There are likely additional factors that promote links between faith variables and positive relationship outcomes. Further research is needed to explore the underpinnings of the links between faith and relational well-being.

## 5.6 Implications

A basic theme in positive psychology is the good life, including how to have meaningful relationships with others. It appears that faith is one mechanism by which individuals can achieve this. The research reviewed in this chapter indicates that people's faith characteristics have the potential to impact the quality of their relationships, including how committed individuals are to relationships, how much people invest in relationships, and how people treat one another in relationships. As we will discuss, these conclusions are relevant on both an individual and societal level, and have implications for policy makers, clinicians, and researchers.

It seems that faith can play a role in cultivating positive traits and qualities that benefit relationships in very meaningful ways. As relationships are central to the lives of most people, the findings reviewed in this chapter are likely relevant to those in the general population. The results of this research may encourage people to begin or renew spiritual practices that they find meaningful, as they have the potential to contribute to their relationships in significant ways. Relationships may benefit from traditional faith practices such as praying or attending church. However, individuals should also consider the potentially powerful effects of faith-based interactions within their relationships, such as shared religious activities, theistic mediation, and spiritual disclosure. Finally, individuals may benefit in their relationships from faith beliefs, particularly those that pertain to relationships, such as sanctification of marriage or parenting.

On a societal level, public policy initiatives aimed at strengthening marriages and families may be aided by an understanding of the beneficial role of faith in relationships. Religion seems to offer values and behaviors that increase the quality of relationship interactions and thereby also increase relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, it is worth exploring if relevant attitudes and skills observed in faith beliefs and practices can be effectively incorporated into secular programs focused on marriage or family life (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009).

### 5.6.1 *Clinical Implications*

Many clinicians aim to promote wellness among couples, families, and those in other relationships. Based on the research reviewed in this chapter, clinicians should be aware that faith is an important dimension of relationships for many individuals. Therefore, faith should not be overlooked as a potential resource for couples, parents, and families. Traditional faith variables, such as religious beliefs and activities, are relevant to the quality of relationships. In addition, faith can go beyond a person's beliefs about God and extend to experiencing spirituality in and through relationships with others in a process referred to as sanctification. Therefore, particularly for those who participate in family or couples counseling, clinicians can benefit from assessing spiritual dimensions and spiritual interpretations

of relationships, as these faith variables can have far reaching implications for the well-being of relationships. In addition, it seems that relationships benefit most when those involved share the same faith perspective and practices. Therefore, it may be fruitful for clinicians to explore faith similarities and differences between individuals within a relationship.

In addition to assessing faith variables, there may even be reason to support spirituality among clients in relationships. The research clearly indicates that faith can impact relationship communication and interactions in positive ways. For example, drawing on research of theistic mediation, it could be helpful for couples to include God or a Higher Power into their family system. In the case of relationship difficulties, this could help to stabilize the relationship by providing a resource for the couple. By focusing on God in the system, the partners can gain a greater perspective of their situation and rely on a Higher Power who has both of their best interests at heart. In addition, each partner may be able to direct emotions and thoughts toward God, aiding in the way they communicate with and behave toward each other.

Of course, empirically, we know less about the effects of *prescribed* faith in comparison to faith beliefs and practices that exist in spontaneous form. There is some initial indication that structured interventions incorporating faith variables offer benefits. For example, Beach et al. (2011) found that incorporating prayer into a marriage enhancement program offered better marital outcomes for wives than not incorporating prayer. Therefore, this topic is worth pursuing further within clinical settings. In addition to encouraging clients to integrate their faith beliefs and practices into their relationship, clinicians may benefit at times from consulting with or referring clients to the clients' religious leaders such as pastors, priests, or rabbis.

### 5.6.2 A Cautionary Note

The majority of research on faith and relationships has highlighted the important benefits that faith has to offer to a wide variety of relationships. Given our emphasis on faith from a positive psychology perspective, we have highlighted these encouraging findings in this chapter. However, it is important to acknowledge that research has also revealed some areas of concern when it comes to faith and relationships that go beyond the scope of this book. Public policy officials, clinicians, researchers, and the general public should be aware of these potentially harmful aspects of faith because they can inhibit the path to relationship flourishing. To clarify some of the potential pitfalls related to faith and relationships, we will briefly highlight some examples of findings from each of the relational arenas we've considered in this chapter.

The role of faith in marital relationships can be quite complex. For example, religious service attendance and biblical beliefs have generally been tied to lower self-reported extramarital sex in national surveys (Burdette et al., 2007; Cochran,

Chamlin, Beeghley, & Fenwick, 2004), but the odds of an affair paradoxically increase for those who frequently attend church but don't feel close to God, and for low attenders who do feel close to God (Atkins & Kessel, 2008). This reveals that to understand the role of faith in relationships, it is important to pay attention not only to global measures of faith such as religious service attendance and general religious beliefs, but also to individuals' personal religious experiences, such as the amount of closeness felt toward God. Faith factors can also interact with individual characteristics. For example, greater religiousness of newlywed husbands improved subjective marital satisfaction when husbands were psychologically well adjusted, but exacerbated marital distress among more neurotic husbands (Sullivan, 2001).

In addition, dyadic faith factors should be considered as well. Some ways in which individuals turn to religion in response to marital conflict can be helpful while others, such as triangulating God into the relationship in a negative way, can be harmful (Butler et al., 2002; Gardner et al., 2008). In particular, differences within a couple regarding religious issues are associated with more arguing (Curtis & Ellison, 2002).

These couple factors are also relevant to children within families. As described in this chapter, many aspects of faith are beneficial to children and families, but this is not true for all faith-related variables. For example, open marital conflict about religious issues seems to be deleterious for children, and is associated with children displaying lower levels of self-control and social interaction, and higher levels of impulsivity, sadness, and loneliness (Bartkowski et al., 2008). Some of these findings are mirrored among adolescents, where greater private religiousness seems to protect those exposed to high levels of stress from emotional and behavioral problems, but higher levels of family religiousness can exacerbate their emotional problems (Ahmed, Fowler, & Toro, 2011).

Some of these findings may relate to the role of faith in parenting and the parent-child relationship. As noted in this chapter, sanctification of parenting is associated with favorable parenting practices; however, struggles with God surrounding parenting difficulties can negate the links between sanctification of parenting and investment in parenting (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006). Also, the degree of similarity in faith between parents and adolescents is relevant. Daughters who view their religious beliefs as similar to their parents' religious beliefs perceive their relationship with their parents to be warmer (Okagaki & Bevis, 1999), but parent-child relationships can suffer when parents value faith more than their adolescents do (Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). For example, theistic mediation is a positive way to deal with conflict between mothers and children when both parties participate, but when only mothers draw God into the relationship and their children do not find this beneficial, theistic mediation can take a form of spiritual superiority (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009). When individuals ally with God against a relationship partner by using God to back their own position and coerce the other to change, this is associated with more verbal aggression and stonewalling in relationships (Brelsford, 2011; Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009). Faith can also impact communication between parents and children in other ways. Parents who are more religious

seem to be less likely to talk to their children about sex and birth control, and are more likely to report unease in communicating about these topics (Regnerus, 2005). Finally, experiencing spiritual struggles with parenting is associated with less parental satisfaction and parental investment (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006).

When it comes to friendships, some research has shown that religion can break social class barriers (Wuthnow, 2003), but other studies have shown that religion is associated with racially homogamous friendships (Park, 2012). A study of racially diverse students from 28 colleges in the U.S. indicated that self-rated religiosity, frequency of religious service attendance, and involvement in a religious student organization were each predictive of fewer interracial friendships (Park, 2012). This is likely due to the fact that the vast majority of religious institutions are racially homogeneous. The implication of such religious homophily is that it places limits on people's social worlds, constricting the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience. Park noted that the solution is likely not to decrease religious activity, given the role of religious communities in supporting individuals of all ethnicities. Rather, as discussed in Chap. 4, individuals of faith should consider how they can draw on the potential of religion to challenge social and racial divisions.

In sum, it seems that findings regarding the impact of faith on relationships are often complex. Faith has the potential to pose either benefits or risks in relationships, depending on individual, relational, and contextual factors. Individuals should be aware of the ways in which faith can play a part in relationship distress so that they can prevent or work through threats to relationships. Nevertheless, generally speaking, faith has been linked to healthier and more satisfying relational interactions (e.g., Mahoney, 2010), thereby helping humans to meet a fundamental need for positive interpersonal relationships.

## 5.7 Directions for Future Research

Our review has highlighted that the research literature on relationships will be greatly enriched if researchers continue to develop and make use of faith measures, as faith variables can offer unique insight about relationships that is not gained when examining secular factors only. Most studies on the topic of faith and relationships have used very narrow definitions of religious faith, typically relying on one or a few indicators of religiousness such as religious affiliation, church attendance, or self-rated religiosity. While positive links have been established with such simple indicators of faith, the amount of insight that can be gained from them about how faith functions within relationships is limited. A theme in this body of research is that links between faith and relationships are most visible when detailed and sensitive measures of faith are used. For example, Davis, Worthington, Hook & Van Tongeren (2009) found among 134 college students that a measure of a

victim's dedication to the sacred in their lives after a transgression had occurred was a much better predictor of the likelihood of being forgiving toward an offender than was a general, trait-like measure of religious commitment. Dedication to the sacred may evoke specific emotions that promote or inhibit forgiveness in interpersonal relationships. These factors would be overlooked when considering only general faith characteristics such as religious affiliation or frequency of church attendance. What this research points out is that measures of faith that are substantive, specific, and sensitive to change over time are the best predictors of relationship characteristics.

In particular, a fruitful avenue for future research is to assess faith variables that are *relational* in nature. These can take two distinct forms. First, making use of relational faith variables can involve simply assessing faith variables that have an interpersonal component. The research reviewed in this chapter makes clear that faith is not only an individual phenomenon, but can also be interpersonal in nature, manifesting in various forms of personal relationships. The majority of current research in this area focuses on how individual faith factors impact relationships. There is less research on relational faith factors, such as engaging in faith activities together within relationships. It would be useful to shift from an individual to a relational perspective. The research that has been conducted on the topic demonstrates that there is value in assessing relationship variables that are based in faith. For example, spiritual disclosure in relationships is predictive of outcome measures above and beyond general self-disclosure (Brelsford et al., 2009). Spiritual disclosure emerging as a related but unique construct to general self-disclosure highlights the fact that measures of faith that are specific to relationships offer greater insight about relational outcomes than do general measures of faith. Therefore, there is value in including faith-based constructs in relationship research that may offer unique insight from secular relational variables.

Second, relational faith variables can involve assessing an individual's psychological integration of spirituality into his/her perception of relationships. Currently, this has most commonly been studied through sanctification of relational topics. What we have seen thus far is that relational faith variables are much more accurate than traditional indicators of religiousness in predicting quality of relationships. For example, Mahoney et al. (2009) found that many couples expecting their first child perceive both their marriage and pregnancy as being a manifestation of God and as being imbued with sacred qualities. These faith views about family were tied to greater spiritual behavioral investment, spiritual emotions, and positive spiritual coping, even after controlling spouses' general religiousness. It seems that faith-based relational variables can be more predictive of relational outcome measures than are secular relational variables and general religious variables. Thus, moving in the direction of relational faith variables is a way to achieve greater understanding in exploring the role of faith within relationships.

The growing body of literature on faith and relationships suggests that faith promotes well-functioning relationships for couples and families. Clearly, there is a dearth of information regarding the role of faith in other, non-familial relationships. Faith is associated with many virtues and characteristics, such as sharing, loyalty, and

honesty, which could be central to flourishing in friendships and other relationships. More empirical research is needed to establish how faith impacts a greater variety of types of relationships to mirror the findings that have been established with regard to marital and family relationships. Thus, there are many opportunities to expand current knowledge of the role of faith in relatively unexplored areas such as the quality of relationships between friends, co-workers, or neighbors. For example, decades of research have shown that the quality of one's friendships is related to happiness across all ages and ethnic groups (Demir, Orthel, & Andelin, 2013). Therefore, understanding how faith may play a role in bolstering friendships can lead to new knowledge about factors that promote human flourishing.

The vast majority of research published on faith and relationships has been conducted as self-report research among U.S. samples, with the majority being based on large national samples. The research has focused primarily on Christian samples, reflecting the predominant religion in the United States. This offers confidence that the findings are likely representative of the U.S. population. However, it is unclear how the link between faith and relationships would apply to those in other countries or religious traditions. This is a major limitation in this body of research. Thus, there is a clear need for more studies to expand this body of research to broader faith contexts. In addition, experimental designs on this topic are exceedingly rare. It would be beneficial to expand research methods to include more experimental designs, such as randomized controlled trials to assess how assigned faith behaviors, such as praying for a relationship partner or engaging in shared religious activities, impact relationship outcomes.

In terms of research content, more studies are needed to explore the specific mechanisms by which faith benefits relationships in order to better understand the reasons why faith is associated with better quality relationships and greater relationship satisfaction. For example, religious beliefs, values, and practices may provide spiritual resources that promote positive relationship interactions, such as forgiveness, empathy, and the experience of relationship support from a Higher Power and religious community. More insight is needed into how these aspects of faith potentially function to improve relationships in daily life.

There is also a need for greater understanding about whether and how faith can help transform dysfunctional relationships. It is clear from the body of research reviewed in this chapter that faith leads to relationship strengths, however, less is known about how faith impacts distressed relationships or individuals seeking relationship help. More clinical trials are needed to evaluate how incorporating faith into the lives or treatment of those in relationship counseling impacts treatment outcomes, particularly long-term.

In sum, research on relationships benefits from examining faith variables. In the arena of relationship research, it is particularly useful to draw on faith variables that are relational in nature. The most effective faith variables are detailed, specific, and sensitive to change over time. The greatest needs in this area of research are to examine non-Christian participants and non-familial relationships. The goal should be to study the specific mechanisms by which faith benefits interpersonal relationships of all kinds.



## 5.8 Chapter Summary

The majority of research on religion and spirituality has taken an individualistic approach. In this chapter, we reviewed quantitative research about how faith relates to positive interpersonal relationships. Specifically, we focused on how faith variables such as religious beliefs, prayer, church attendance, and relational faith interactions (e.g., talking about faith together or engaging in religious activities together) relate to the quality of personal relationships. Quality of relationships was assessed through constructs such as relationship partners being loving to one another, providing one another with emotional support, engaging in forgiveness, handling relationship conflicts in beneficial ways, and reporting high levels of relationship satisfaction. We were inclusive of research on all forms of personal relationships, such as friendships, romantic relationships, marriage, parenting, and family life. However, the majority of this research has focused on the role of faith for families, including marriage and parenting.

Research findings indicate that numerous faith variables are associated with better quality marital relationships, including greater marital satisfaction, commitment, and fidelity; better conflict resolution; and less marital conflict and physical aggression. Similarly, when it comes to parenting, numerous faith variables of parents were associated with greater parental commitment, involvement with children, and affection; favorable parenting practices and parent-child interactions; better quality parent-child relationships; and lower likelihood of physical abuse of children. These findings were based on both parent and youth reports. Furthermore, child faith variables were also associated with better quality parent-child interactions and more satisfaction with parent-child relationships. In addition to bolstering marriage and parent-child relationships, faith has been linked to overall family functioning and levels of satisfaction with family life.

While research on the role of faith in families has become quite common, research focusing on faith and nonfamilial relationships is still sparse. Some research has been conducted on nonmarital romantic relationships, primarily among college students in dating relationships. While this body of research is relatively small, both longitudinal and experimental data are available. Faith variables, primarily prayer, have been associated with positive relationship interactions, positive change in relationships, increases in relationship satisfaction and commitment, and decreases in negative behaviors in relationships. In addition, a handful of studies have examined how faith relates to the quality of friendships, indicating that faith variables are associated with closer emotional ties among friends, more sharing and support in friendships, and greater likelihood of engaging in forgiveness.

Taken together, it seems that faith variables can offer unique insight about relationships that is not gained when studying secular factors only. The research literature suggests that faith-based interactions within relationships provide stronger links to positive relationship outcomes than traditional faith measures, such as general religious beliefs and frequency of prayer or church attendance. Relational

faith-based variables include religious beliefs about a relationship, such as sanctification of a relationship, and shared religious activities, theistic mediation, and spiritual disclosure.

Possible mechanisms contributing to links between faith and relational well-being include that faith promotes relationship values, social support, and spiritual resources that encourage positive relationship outcomes. The fact that faith characteristics have the potential to impact the quality of relationships, including how committed individuals are to relationships, how much people invest in relationships, and how people treat one another in relationships, has implications for the general population, public policy, clinicians, and research. Future research in this domain will be most informative when faith measures are detailed, sensitive, and relational in nature. More research is needed on the role of faith in friendships and other non-familial relationships. In addition, there is a clear need to expand research on links between faith and relationships to more religions and cultures.

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## Chapter 6

# Faith and Community

As noted in several previous chapters, an early conceptualization offered by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) involves the subfield of positive psychology encompassing three pillars. The first focuses on a subjective level which includes positive emotions and the second focuses on the individual level which includes positive traits. The final pillar focuses on the group or societal level and includes the development and maintenance of positive institutions, civic virtues, and healthy families and work environments. One critique of the field of positive psychology, in general, is that there is too much emphasis on the individual and too little focus on this third pillar, and in particular, not enough emphasis on positive societies and communities (Diener, 2009). This limitation is also true of research specifically examining the impact of faith on positive societies and communities (Maton, Domingo, & Westin, 2013). In the previous chapter we focused on the role of faith in interpersonal relationships, such as friendships, marriage, and parent-child interactions, while in this chapter we move beyond interpersonal relationships by examining the impact of faith within communities and their institutions. Here we focus on why faith matters to community functioning in general, as well as why faith matters to functioning in particular settings and institutions within the larger community, such as schools, the workplace, and religious institutions. Our discussion will include two levels of faith-related community outcomes: group-level outcomes and individual-level outcomes. Group-level outcomes accrue at levels that involve more than one individual in a community or institutional setting such as social well-being, social capital, and organizational effectiveness. Individual-level outcomes accrue at the level of an individual person but occur within the context of a community or institution such as school or workplace performance and satisfaction. Most of the research to date focuses on individual-level outcomes within institutional settings with very little research available that focuses on group-level outcomes.

Operational definitions of faith and spirituality vary dramatically across studies examining the impact of faith within communities and institutions at both the group- and individual-level. Scholars have defined these constructs in myriad



ways that are similar to definitions discussed in previous chapters, including attendance at religious services, belief in God, church membership, and personal religious commitment. The research on the role of faith in the workplace includes additional conceptualizations of faith to include a sense of ‘calling’ as well as the construct of sanctification. Researchers have also differed in terms of the various outcome measures they have chosen to examine as evidence of optimal functioning. Research examining the impact of faith in educational settings has focused primarily on academic achievement, educational aspirations, and education satisfaction outcomes. In the workplace setting, scholars have largely been concerned with work satisfaction and organizational commitment. Efforts to examine the impact of faith in faith-based organizations have primarily examined various outreach efforts. Throughout this chapter we will describe the unique operational definitions of faith used by researchers as well as the outcome variables that relate to faith.

Because the empirical literature examining the impact of faith on communities is relatively sparse, we begin this chapter by describing a model based on theoretical arguments relating group-level faith outcomes within communities and provide evidence of the role of religious faith for one’s sense of belonging and participation in a community, which contributes to community well-being. We then review research on the impact of faith within various specific institutions including educational, workplace, and faith-based organizational settings which focuses primarily on individual-level outcomes. We conclude the chapter by examining important implications based on the empirical literature for the field of psychology and explore directions for future research. Toward the end of the chapter, we also provide a cautionary note about some potential negative effects of faith, particularly in the workplace setting.

## **6.1 A Theoretical Model of Faith and Community Well-Being**

Within the field of positive psychology, the importance of a community level of analysis is emphasized on the basis that in addition to individual well-being, community well-being is of import. There are several theoretical arguments for faith being important to optimal human functioning and well-being at the community level. First, faith relates to communities because it can promote social well-being. Second, the field of community psychology provides a framework for understanding how faith can create a sense of community and belonging. Third, faith is relevant to communities because it can bolster social capital, or connections among and within social networks that creates social cohesion. These theoretical arguments contribute to a working model of how faith operates in communities to enhance well-being at a community level.



### ***6.1.1 Faith and Social Well-Being***

Faith can contribute directly to community or social well-being. Keyes (1998, 2009) conceptualized social well-being as comprising five dimensions. Of particular relevance to the current discussion are the following three dimensions, which focus specifically on interactions and functioning within one's community:

- Social acceptance which refers to the degree to which people hold positive attitudes toward others.
- Social contribution which refers to the degree to which people believe their daily activities contribute to society and are valued by their community
- Social integration which refers to the degree to which a person feels a part of his or her community including how much support and commonality one feels toward others.

These dimensions correlate positively with measures of optimal human functioning such as happiness, life satisfaction, generativity, optimism, perceptions of neighborhood trust and safety, and degree of community involvement (Keyes, 1998, 2009).

Faith can contribute directly to social well-being as the dimensions of social well-being outlined by Keyes are consistent with explicit goals of faith communities. Faith communities, for example, often attempt to enhance social integration by providing members with increased social ties and social support within the religious community (Sasaki & Kim, 2011). Faith communities also provide opportunities for their members to contribute socially through community involvement to either help solve individual problems of those in need or to address systemic problems through social action targeting social injustices such as poverty and violence (Maton & Pargament, 1987). There is also evidence that faith communities contribute to feelings of social acceptance as members in some congregations report high levels of affirmation from other members (Maton & Rappaport, 1984). Several authors have described other ways in which faith and spirituality operate at the community level to potentially enhance optimal human functioning, such as providing a variety of social services and coping resources for individuals involved in such communities (George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002; Maton & Pargament, 1987; Maton & Wells, 1995; Seybold & Hill, 2001). Finally, as noted in Chap. 3, religious faith offers unique benefits to community life by promoting specific world views that serve as a foundation for honesty, generosity, selflessness, and other moral qualities that strengthen communities. There is mounting evidence that these benefits of faith in community not only enhance social well-being, but offer a distinctive potential for positive influence above and beyond that of similar non faith-based efforts (Maton & Pargament, 1987; Maton & Wells, 1995).

### ***6.1.2 Faith and Sense of Community***

Faith is also relevant to community well-being because it helps to offer a sense of community. The dimensions of social acceptance, contribution, and integration described in the previous section undoubtedly contribute to a person's sense of community, as do shared values. The field of community psychology provides a theoretical basis for examining faith in communities and shared values with its emphasis on the role of a person's environment and social world, which moves attention and interest beyond the individual. This perspective emphasizes that people exist not in isolation but in a constant variety of intricate relationships within their environment (Rappaport & Seidman, 2000; Smith, 2001). A number of scholars have argued for the importance of integrating faith and spirituality in studying communities because of their relevance to building a sense of community through shared values (Dokecki, Newbrough, & O'Gorman, 2001; Hill, 2000; Walsh-Bowers, 2000). Hill, for example, argued that because a sense of community is the overarching value in community psychology (e.g., a well-functioning community fosters a sense of community in its members), and because most theories of sense of community include shared values as a key component, faith and spirituality are important because shared values include religious values. Indeed, Hill concluded that "These links between community psychology, sense of community, shared values, and spiritual values seem to support the idea that an understanding of the role of spiritual values in community life is central to an understanding of communities" (p. 144). Others have similarly argued that matters of faith are not only critical to individuals' understanding of community but also contribute to a sense of shared meanings and empowerment found in communities (Dokecki et al. 2001; Walsh-Bowers, 2000).

### ***6.1.3 Faith and Social Capital***

In addition, faith contributes to community well-being because faith can bolster social capital (Coleman, 1988; Compton & Hoffman, 2012; Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003), a construct that overlaps conceptually with many of the benefits of faith in community just discussed above, including the development of intricate relationships and networks that provide a sense of social acceptance, contribution, and integration – or sense of community. Social capital specifically refers to the intricate web of connections among various social networks in addition to connections within those social networks. According to Compton and Hoffman (2012), societies high in social capital are characterized by a greater sense of trust in other people, more reciprocity and helpfulness, greater participation in social and civic activities, and stronger societies. Social capital has been linked in empirical studies to various measures of optimal human functioning such as physical health and academic achievement (Poortinga, 2006; Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003; Yip et al., 2007).

Studies are beginning to appear which claim that religious communities as well as personal faith provide important sources of social capital. Active involvement in a faith community, for example, can enhance social capital in terms of providing an important source of social ties marked by trust and reciprocity that is grounded in deeply held belief systems (Coleman, 1988; Ream 2001; Verba, Lehman Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). In addition, involvement in a faith community can provide important resources, one component of social capital, such as information and values (Coleman, 1988; Morgan and Sørensen 1999). Participation in faith communities is also likely to contribute to a network structure that James Coleman has dubbed “intergenerational closure,” which is important for transmitting the values and norms of the community to the next generation (Coleman, 1988; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Social capital within faith communities may also have positive benefits through the organizational links between churches and community organizations thereby fostering civic participation within the local community (Verba et al. 1995).

#### ***6.1.4 Empirical Support for a Model of Faith and Community Well-Being***

According to the various theoretical arguments just reviewed, faith has the potential to impact communities in a variety of ways that include enhancing social acceptance, social capital, and various social contributions along with building a sense of community. The common outcome among all appears to be the role that faith plays in enhancing community members’ sense of involvement and belonging within that community, or cohesion, which then leads to a sense of community well-being. There is considerable empirical research supporting the notion that faith enhances community well-being generally, as well as within specific contexts such as the educational system.

Barnes (2003), for example, found that frequency of religious service attendance was one of the most important predictors of neighborhood socializing among 2,490 racially diverse residents of poor urban neighborhoods in Chicago. Religious attendance was associated with neighborhood socializing even beyond race/ethnicity, household economics, and neighborhood poverty context. However, it should be noted that neighborhood socializing was measured on the basis of regular participation across five types of social activities (block clubs, political parties, PTA or school groups, social clubs, and church related groups), one of which included involvement in church-related groups. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that religious involvement may contribute to building social cohesion within communities.

Work by Dill and Wink (2007) also supports the important role of faith in building a sense of community and belonging. These researchers followed a representative sample of approximately 200 men and women from the San Francisco Bay Area from childhood to late adulthood and provided an in-depth, longitudinal examination of the participants’ lives giving a balanced view of religion’s influence on everyday life. Results indicated that highly religious

individuals tended to gravitate toward social activities and community service more so than those who were less religious. Religious and spiritual participants, for example, were characterized by altruism and were more likely than their non-religious and non-spiritual counterparts to participate in a variety of local communal projects (e.g., helping the homeless). The link between faith and community involvement was not diminished when controlling for health and depression, suggesting that the social involvement of highly religious individuals cannot easily be explained by these nonreligious factors.

There is also considerable evidence that various efforts of faith-based organizations contribute to building a sense of community and involvement among its members, thereby impacting community cohesion (Maton & Pargament, 1987; Maton & Wells, 1995). For example, Garrett, Antrop-González, and Vélez (2010) conducted a qualitative study in which he interviewed Puerto Rican inner-city high-school boys and reported that their ties to their religious communities not only gave them access to information, but provided essential mentoring opportunities and social support: all key they believed to their academic success. Churches also instill a sense of civic responsibility in their members, which leads to volunteerism and other forms of civic involvement which can have an impact on community cohesion and influence (Maton et al., 2013; Maton & Pargament, 1987; Maton & Wells, 1995).

Other research has examined the notion of intergenerational closure as an example of community involvement and belonging. Religious participation may influence the structure of social networks by increasing intergenerational closure, or the extent to which different generations interact. Church activities can provide a context, for example, in which parents get to know their children's friends as well as the parents of those friends. In addition, most religious activities involve multiple generations, increasing the likelihood for active youth to form relationships with adults, such as parents of friends. Besides the opportunity for creating cross-generational ties, participating in religious communities may foster norms that encourage active efforts to create such ties among youth because religious groups encourage adult commitment to the socialization of children (Glanville, Sikkink, & Hernandez, 2008).

Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a school-based longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of 7th through 12th graders, provides evidence of the relationship between faith and intergenerational closure. This study found that among its 20,475 respondents, religious involvement, defined as church attendance and participation in church youth activities, predicted greater intergenerational closure. Intergenerational closure was measured with an item that asked parents the number of their child's friends' parents they had talked to in the previous 4 weeks. Further evidence is provided by another longitudinal study of a large sample of public high school students from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. Students were followed from 10th to 12th grade. Religious involvement was measured as frequency of attendance at religious services, participation in religious activities, and self-rated religiosity. In this study, the researchers examined intergenerational closure as the extent to which parents knew the teens' friends' parents. Religious involvement during the 10th grade was predictive of current and future 12th grade intergenerational closure (Muller & Ellison, 2001). These researchers also examined the frequency with

which students talked with parents about school experiences and found that higher religious involvement among 10th grade students was associated with higher parents' educational expectations and higher levels of talking with parents about school, both cross-sectionally as well as longitudinally, during the 12th grade.

Other studies support the impact faith has on community cohesion in the context of the educational community. In Sikkink and Hernandez (2003) analysis of the 1996 National Household Education Survey, for example, Latino parents with children in Catholic and other religious schools were much more highly involved in school activities than Latino parents in any other type of school, including private nonreligious schools or public schools of choice. Moreover, these findings were maintained even after accounting for differences in parent income, education, age, English-language use, church attendance, region, and community size. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health also examined a number of social capital variables that contribute to a sense of community cohesion, particularly among Latino youth (Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003). These researchers found that students who attended weekly church services reported feeling more connected and having higher quality relationships with their peers and teachers at their schools than students who did not attend church regularly. This association was stronger among adolescents with low socio-economic backgrounds than those with high socio-economic backgrounds. The association between religion and getting along with teachers was also quite strong for Latinos. For example, 48 % of Latino kids who attend church had no trouble at all getting along with teachers. In contrast, only 38 % of those who never attend services made this claim. Latino students who attend church regularly were also less likely to have trouble getting along with other students. About 11 % of Latinos who never attend church have trouble with other students almost every day or more, while only 5 % of Latinos who attend church weekly have this level of trouble with other students.

These studies suggest that personal faith and involvement in a faith community provide various opportunities for social acceptance, social contribution, and social integration through various networks that contribute to a sense of community belonging and cohesion. According to Coleman (1988), such opportunities stem from a unique quality of certain forms of social relationships that facilitate action and contribute to positive outcomes by providing values and norms for positive behavior, circulating useful information, and social investments governed by reciprocity and trust. Faith appears to provide an important source of community cohesion within meaningful relationships within the church, but also extending to the spheres of family and school.

## 6.2 Faith in Educational Settings

There is a long-standing tension that exists between faith, religion, and spirituality on the one hand, and educational institutions on the other, particularly in the United States. Higher education in the U.S., for example, has typically been characterized

by a separation between academic and religious pursuits (Thompson & Miller-Perrin, 2008). According to research by Astin and Astin (1999), for example, college professors are often discouraged from attending to matters of faith and spirituality in their classrooms and in their conversations with students. Faith and spirituality have also largely been ignored by professionals within the field of student affairs within colleges (Love & Talbot, 1999). The most oft cited reason for these secularization trends is a growing commitment to scientific or research-based approaches to knowledge (Cohen, 1998; Hart, 1999; Marsden, 1992; Stamm, 2006; Yankelovich, 2005). Similar tensions exist in primary and secondary educational institutions. At this educational level, tensions are most likely due to various constitutional provisions in the First Amendment that address the separation of church from the state, including public schools (Chickering, 2006; Lowery, 2007).

In recent years, however, there has been an emerging shift in the views of religion and spirituality's role in education. First, there have been many postmodern criticisms of the modern assumption that reason is the only legitimate path to knowledge. The postmodern notion that 'truth' can be defined from multiple perspectives, allows for consideration of other legitimate pathways to truth and knowledge. As Rockenbach and Townsend (2013) note, "What modernism cast as untenable, unscientific, and beyond the scope of legitimate knowledge, postmodernism welcomed as part of the plurality of possible truths" (p. 579). The connection between faith and education is also evident in the views of college students themselves who are increasingly interested in matters of religion, faith, and spirituality and how it relates to their life purpose and sense of personal wholeness (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010; Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001; Higher Education Research Institute, 2005; Thompson & Miller-Perrin, 2008; Young, 2003). In addition, many scholars have argued that the role of faith and spiritual development is an important part of the mission of primary, secondary, and postsecondary education to address the whole person (Astin, 2004; Eisler, 2005; Kessler, 2005; Stamm, 2004). Astin argues, for example, that educators have primarily focused on "exterior" dimensions of education such as test scores, grades, and degree attainment to the detriment of "interior" dimensions such as values and beliefs, moral development, self-understanding, and spirituality.

Although there is scant research about the potential of applying positive psychology theory and practice in educational settings (see Huebner, Gilman, Reschly, & Hall, 2009; Peterson, 2006; Schreiner, Hulme, Hetzel, & Lopez, 2009), the research literature focusing specifically on religion and spirituality within the school setting is even more limited. In general, a positive psychology focus within educational settings focuses on promoting the well-being of students by developing personal strengths and competencies, building cooperative interpersonal relationships, enhancing resiliency, individualizing experiences for students, and allowing students opportunities to be fully engaged in school activities and learning (Huebner et al., 2009; Maehr, Midgley, & Urdan, 1992; Martin & Marsh, 2008; Miller & Nickerson, 2007; Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Within this positive psychology context, incorporating religion and spirituality into educational institutions can provide opportunities "for growth in self-understanding, well-being, acceptance of diverse others, and religious literacy" (Rockenbach & Townsend, 2013, p. 577).

Research in this area has primarily focused on specific educational outcomes such as education satisfaction, educational aspirations, and academic achievement (e.g., Mooney, 2010; Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003; UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2005). Although several positive relationships have been noted between faith and educational outcomes, less is known about the reasons for these outcomes. A few studies have examined the potential impact of religion on community cohesion within educational settings, as noted above, which is one possible explanation (e.g., Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003). The large majority of all of these studies have been conducted on high school and college students while a few studies have examined the impact of parent faith variables on child-related outcomes.

### ***6.2.1 Education Satisfaction***

A number of studies have examined how spiritual engagement impacts students' satisfaction with their college experiences. In one large scale study conducted by the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute National Study of College Students' Search for meaning and Purpose (UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2005), researchers surveyed more than 100,000 students at 236 colleges and universities and found that students who engaged in religious or spiritual practices reported greater satisfaction with their overall college experience, as well as greater satisfaction with their social life and interactions with other students. In another large scale study, Kuh and Gonyea (2006) surveyed approximately 150,000 students at over 450 colleges using data from the national Survey of Student Engagement. Their findings indicated that students who engaged in "spiritually enhancing practices" defined as worship, meditation, and prayer, were more satisfied with college and viewed the non classroom environment more positively. Another study using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen and a sample of nearly 4,000 students found similar results. Mooney (2010) surveyed students at 28 of the most selective colleges and universities in the U.S. and found that students who attended religious services weekly, and those who were more observant of their religious traditions, reported being more satisfied with college.

### ***6.2.2 Educational Aspirations***

Other studies have examined the educational aspirations of students. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey, for example, examined the relationship between parent religiosity and educational aspirations and activities that promote learning for first-grade Latinos (Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003). In this study, a nationally representative sample of 2,900 parents of Latino children was surveyed. Findings indicated that parents' religious attendance and parent-child discussion of religion were both positively related to Latino parents' educational aspirations for their



children. These findings were maintained even after controlling for parental socio-economic status, mother's education, urban location, private schooling for children, and other factors that might influence educational expectations.

In the same report, Sikkink and Hernandez (2003) discussed findings from the National Household Education Survey, which included a national sample of approximately 2,800 Hispanics including 1,400 parents and 1,400 children. The survey asked whether anyone in the family had in the past month discussed future high school courses or post high school plans with their child. Again, Latinos who attend church more frequently were far more likely to discuss future plans with their children. In a model that controlled for differences that may be related both to child discussions and religion, these researchers still found that Latinos that were the most frequent attenders were 24 % more likely to have discussed future plans with their child than those parents who attended services only several times a year.

### ***6.2.3 Educational Achievement***

Perhaps the greatest number of studies focusing on faith in educational settings has examined the impact of faith on school achievement as the outcome variable. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey (Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003), discussed above, also examined the relationship between religiosity of parents and first graders' standardized test scores in reading, science, and general knowledge. Although the preliminary analysis did not show strong direct effects of religious attendance among Latinos on standardized test scores, the researchers noted a positive but indirect relation that they believed was likely due to other parent-child interaction factors such as reading to their child. The authors concluded that religious involvement is related to increased educational opportunities for first-grade Latino children in several ways, such as increased reading and other forms of parent interaction and increased connections to community institutions that provide educational opportunities for children. This is consistent with the view that social capital generated within churches can provide important educational resources, especially for Latino youth.

Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, examining a nationally representative sample of older students in the 7th–12th grade which included 1,236 Latinos also examined the impact of religiosity on academic achievement. Findings from this study indicated that math grades were positively associated with religiosity among Latino teenagers. In addition, the authors found that the positive effect of religiosity extended to grades in science, to an even greater degree. The longitudinal component of this study revealed that a change in religiosity across 2 years had a positive effect on math scores, although only marginally statically significantly. Latino teens with higher levels of religiosity in 1994, however, were doing significantly better in math in 1996. More powerful longitudinal evidence of a causal role for religiosity was evidenced for science scores as the findings from this study demonstrated that an increase in religiosity from 1994 to 1996 was associated with higher science grades.



Although studies of elementary, middle school, and high school students generally show a positive relationship between religiosity and academic success, studies using samples of college students demonstrate mixed findings. For example, some studies have found that those with fundamentalist religious beliefs attain less education overall than their nonfundamentalist counterparts (Sherkat & Darnell, 1999). Other studies suggest that some students devote an inordinate amount of time to their religious commitments and in so doing their studies are impacted negatively (Bryant, 2007). In contrast, several recent large scale studies have found a positive relationship between faith and academic achievement. The UCLA study noted above, for example, found that students who engage in religious or spiritual practices report higher grade point averages (UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2005). Margarita Mooney (2010) using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen which included a sample of nearly 4,000 students at 28 of the most selective colleges and universities in the United States, found that religiosity was associated with various academic achievement measures. For example, students who attended religious services once a week or more during their last year of high school reported higher GPAs in college, even after controlling for several background factors such as race, sex, family structure and income, parental education, and high school achievement. In contrast, self-reported level of religious observance (i.e., observing one's religious traditions and customs) was not related to GPA. In this study, religious students also reported studying more. Mooney also found specific differences with regard to religious affiliation whereby Jewish students earned the highest grades in college compared to other religious traditions. These more recent studies, although limited methodologically, nonetheless provide compelling evidence of the potential positive impact of faith on academic achievement in college students.

Other researchers have examined the impact of religious school attendance on academic achievement. Early work by social scientists in this area was mixed, with some concluding that attendance at such schools, in comparison to attending public schools, enhanced educational outcomes (Coleman, 1988; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Gaziel, 1997) while others asserted the opposite (Noell, 1982; Willms, 1985). More recently a consensus has emerged acknowledging that religious schools in general, and Catholic schools in particular, are associated with higher academic achievement (Jeynes, 2002). In a recent meta-analysis of 15 studies examining the effects of attending religious schools on the academic achievement of Black and Hispanic students, Jeynes found that attending religious schools was positively associated with the overall academic achievement of elementary, middle, and high school students, as well as achievement test scores, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and gender. In addition, Jeynes examined the impact of personal religious commitment, a variable that has been largely neglected by previous researchers. Findings indicated statistically significant levels of impact of religious commitment on overall academic achievement, grade point average, and scores on achievement tests, even more consistently than for the impact of religious school attendance.

The reasons for the impact of faith on educational variables, whether measured as religious school attendance, attendance at religious services, or personal religious commitment, have only rarely been studied. However, there are several possible reasons that have been proposed for this association. Jeynes (2002) highlights three possible reasons. First, it may be that students of faith adhere to a religious work ethic, often referred to as the Protestant work ethic, but which likely extends to other religious groups. A second reason includes the idea that religious people are more likely to have various personality traits, such as an internal locus of control, which has been associated with academic success. Finally, religious school attendance and personal religious commitment may be associated with academic success because religious individuals tend to avoid various behaviors (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse, teenage sexual behavior) that might be harmful to academic achievement. Others have speculated that the impact of faith on educational variables may be due to differences in school cultures (Gaziel, 1997), the promotion of parental involvement (Coleman, 1988; Riley, 1996), or the proportion of disadvantaged, ethnic minority, and low income children (Baker, 1998; Marsch, 1991; Morris, 1994).

### 6.3 Faith in the Workplace

There is some research literature about the potential of applying positive psychology theory and practice in workplace settings (e.g., Luthans & Youssef, 2009; Peterson, 2006). According to Luthans and Youssef, “management and organizational behavior researchers have begun taking a more balanced perspective by not only trying to fix what is wrong with dysfunctional organizations and employees, but also taking a positive, strengths-based approach to organizations and human resource management” (p. 579). A positive psychology approach to the work setting also includes addressing faith and spirituality in the workplace; several scholars have begun to study its impact at both the individual and institutional level (for reviews see Carroll, 2013; Peterson, 2006). Faith and spirituality are important concepts in the workplace setting, in part, because of the role of work in providing a sense of meaning and purpose to one’s life, what is often referred to as one’s sense of calling. As noted in Chap. 1, one of the pillars within the field of positive psychology is a sense of meaning which emerges when one is using his or her strengths to belong and contribute to something greater than the self (Seligman, 2002). This theme of contributing to something greater than the self has been linked, throughout history and across the various religious traditions of the world, to the integration of one’s faith with their work life (Carroll, 2013). As Carroll notes, “throughout human history, holy writings such as the Bible, the Qur’an, and the Bhagavad Gita have instructed followers to apply their beliefs to all areas of daily life, especially their work” (pp. 597–598).

Psychologists have studied the significance and meaning of the work in which people engage. Although work has traditionally been associated with earning a living, psychologists studying this area have come to understand a much more

complex view of the motivations behind work. In general, individuals tend to view their work in one of three ways including (1) as a 'job' that includes work for financial gain or the need to earn a living; (2) as a 'career' which includes an occupation that provides a way to motivate achievement, stimulate a need for competition, or enhance prestige and satisfaction; or (3) as a 'calling' which provides a source of personal meaning or fulfillment, often stemming from the belief that this calling serves a socially useful purpose (Wrzesniewski, McCauly, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Wrzesniewski and colleagues found these three different views manifested across a variety of occupations from blue collar worker to business executive. In addition, when individuals viewed their work as a 'calling,' income, status, and prestige had little to do with what motivated their work.

The construct of calling among U.S. researchers has traditionally been tied to Western religions. In particular, calling has often been referenced in the context of vocation or the Latin *vocare* which means 'to call.' In a religious or spiritual context, this calling refers to a divine summons to engage in the lifework to which God has called one (Thompson & Miller-Perrin, 2008). Drawing from the conceptual literature on vocation, Thompson and Miller-Perrin (2003) emphasized two key components to vocational calling including the imperative to use one's God-given gifts and the directive to use those gifts in service to others. Dik and Duffy (2009) similarly identified various components of calling, emphasizing the importance of the transcendent in their definition of calling as "a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation" (p. 427). These definitions of calling are broad and recognize that vocational calling includes one's work or occupation, but is not limited to one's job or employment. Vocational calling refers to one's *sacred lifework*, which includes any human activity that gives meaning, purpose, and direction to life (Thompson & Miller-Perrin, 2008).

The construct of sanctification, frequently discussed in the psychology of religion literature, has also contributed to understandings of the concept of calling. In this context, sanctification refers to "the process through which aspects of life are perceived as having divine character and significance" (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005, p. 183). One such aspect of life, of course, includes one's work. Other contemporary psychological researchers, however, acknowledge that 'calling' can be more broadly defined to not only include callings that hold spiritual significance, but that adhere to other significant features such as an action orientation or an emphasis on doing rather than being, a nonreligious sense of purpose, meaning, or direction, and a prosocial intention that includes a desire to make the world a better place (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Hunter, Dik, & Banning, 2010). Martin Seligman (2002) has discussed the concept of vocation specifically in the context of the field of positive psychology by stating that "if you can find a way to use your signature strengths at work often and you also see your work as contributing to the greater good, you have a calling" (p. 173). Common to most of these conceptualizations of calling is a motivation to engage in activities that provide meaning, direction, and purpose that contribute to something beyond the self.

Although one's work can stem from many different motivational sources, it is clear that for a significant number of individuals, that motivation is associated with personal religious and spiritual beliefs. In one study, Thompson and Miller-Perrin (2008) asked college professors at a Christian university about their definitions of vocational calling and the faculty in this sample generally conceptualized vocation in religious terms. Ninety-two percent of faculty, for example, agreed that vocation refers to one's life purpose while 82 % agreed that vocation is God's will for one's life. In another study, Davidson and Caddell (1994) studied several denominations and found that people with a strong faith were more likely to see their work as a calling.

These studies make it clear that there is much to learn by gaining some understanding of how faith and spirituality impact the workplace. Scholars are only just beginning to extend positive psychology approaches to the work setting to include addressing religion and spirituality in the work place, although the topic of workplace spirituality is a fast growing area of new research (Carroll, 2013; Giacalone, Jurkiewicz, & Fry, 2005; Hill, Jurkiewicz, Giacalone, & Fry, 2013). The work that has been conducted on this topic focuses primarily on workplace behaviors and attitudes of both employees and managers, as well as the role of religion and spirituality at the organizational level. In the sections that follow, we review the empirical research that has examined the role of faith in contributing to optimal human functioning in the workplace setting including research on faith, calling, and sanctification as they relate to work satisfaction, organizational commitment and job retention. Recent research examining the role of faith as a method of coping with job stress and as a tool for enhancing organizational leadership will also be reviewed.

### ***6.3.1 Positive Outcomes of Faith, Calling, and Sanctification***

Several studies have examined self-reported religiosity and spirituality and positive workplace outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and productivity. In 2005, for example, Sikorska-Simmons studied the relationship between religious orientations and both job satisfaction and organizational commitment among health care staff and administrators. Results of this study indicated that high levels of self-reported religiosity were strongly correlated with these workplace outcomes. In another study, Brooks and Matthews (2000) examined the role of spiritual practices on employee burnout among a group of counselors working with clients with addictions. These researchers found that those who engaged in daily spiritual practices demonstrated increased spiritual well-being, which was associated with reduced burnout. Additional research using both quantitative as well as qualitative methods have found similar outcomes related to faith such as increased organizational commitment, lower turnover and burnout, and greater job satisfaction as well as more effective home-work balance and increased job motivation (e.g., Dlugos & Friedlander, 2001; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003; Nur & Organ, 2006;

Sagie, 1993). Studies examining the reasons for these links have only recently appeared. Rego and Cunha (2008), for example, interviewed 361 individuals from 154 organizations to determine how employees' perceptions about workplace spirituality contributed to their level of organizational commitment. These researchers found that increased perceptions of workplace spirituality were associated with various forms of commitment such as employees feeling more affectively attached to their organizations, experiencing a greater sense of obligation/loyalty toward them, and feeling less instrumentally committed (e.g., remaining in an organization because of perceived costs associated with leaving the organization). Furthermore, these forms of organizational commitment were attributed to employees' greater sense of community, feeling that their values aligned with those of the organization, perceiving that their work is meaningful and helpful, and experiencing work enjoyment. In a recent review of 140 articles identified in the empirical literature on spirituality and workplace performance, Karakas (2010) conclusions corroborated these findings and suggested that there are three potential explanations for how spirituality benefits employees and supports organizational performance including enhancing employee well-being and quality of life, providing a sense of purpose and meaning at work, and enhancing employees sense of interconnectedness and community.

The specific concept of calling has received very little research attention despite its potential importance to individual success, resilience, and job satisfaction. The few studies that have examined the impact of having a sense of calling on employees have consistently found that having a sense of calling is associated with a number of positive outcomes (e.g., Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011; Serow, 1994; Sikorska-Simmons, 2005; Wrzesniewski et al. 1997). The results from the study on calling described above, conducted by Wrzesniewski and colleagues, indicated that office workers who perceived their work as a calling reported significantly higher levels of job satisfaction compared to those who viewed their work as a job or career. Duffy et al. (2011) studied university employees who viewed their work as calling and found that a sense of calling increased career commitment, which mediated the relationship between calling and job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and withdrawal intentions. In another study, individuals who experienced their work as a calling had more focused career decision making, higher motivation, increased job satisfaction, lower stress and frustration, stronger organizational commitment, and better citizenship behavior (Elangovan et al., 2009).

Sanctification of one's work, or viewing it as sacred in some way, has also been found to relate to positive outcomes associated with the workplace. In one study discussed previously in Chap. 4, those who sanctified their work were more committed to their organizations, less intent on leaving their jobs, and more satisfied with their jobs (Walker, Jones, Wuensch, Aziz, & Cope, 2008). These findings were maintained even after controlling for demographic variables and general religiosity. Carroll (2013) also described his study of a national sample of individuals working at a religiously affiliated institution and found comparable positive outcomes associated with sanctification after controlling for Big Five personality traits. Hall, Oates, Anderson, and Willingham (2012) studied the relationship between sanctification of work and various outcomes for working mothers

with one or more children at home. Their findings indicated that women's tendency to view their work as sacred was associated with more positive affect and less role conflicts (Hall et al., 2012).

These studies suggest that personal faith, as well as experiencing one's work as a calling or sacred activity is associated with greater commitment and satisfaction with one's job or career. In addition, studies on calling and sanctification found that such findings are maintained even after controlling for various potential confounding variables such as demographic characteristics, general religiosity, and personality traits. Although more research is needed, these preliminary findings suggest the importance of examining personal faith commitments, the constructs of calling and sanctification in the workplace, and their impact on positive workplace outcomes.

### ***6.3.2 Faith and Job Stress***

Very few studies have directly examined the relationship between faith and job stress. Some of the studies reviewed in the previous section have indirectly examined this relationship by studying employees working in jobs that might be viewed as high stress, such as health care staff and administrators working in assisted living facilities and counselors working with clients suffering from addictions. Findings suggest positive associations between faith and workplace outcomes in these populations (Brooks & Matthews, 2000; Sikorska-Simmons, 2005). One study examined the faith-job stress link more directly by conducting focus groups with individuals working in acute care and hospice settings. The findings of this study suggested that those employees with a more active faith life were likely to report that integrating their faith into their work activities, such as using prayer as a resource, helped them cope with the challenging nature of their jobs. Additional research is needed because of the potential benefits of faith in helping employees cope with stressful jobs and working conditions.

### ***6.3.3 Faith and Organizational Ethics and Leadership***

As we have noted, faith has the potential to impact the workplace at the level of the individual employee. New research also suggests the potential impact of faith at the organizational level. For example, one issue that has been discussed in the research literature is the match between characteristics of the employee and that of the institution or organization employing that individual (Carroll, 2013; Exline & Bright, 2011). Exline and Bright (2011), for example, discussed the conflict that might arise within individual employees when their personal religious, moral, and ethical principles are not in alignment with those of their place of employment, which may ultimately affect productivity. Although very little empirical research has examined the potential impact of such matching efforts, some have

recommended that businesses and organizations proactively communicate their mission to both prospective and current employees in order to increase the likelihood of an “effective match between the employers’ needs and the employees’ expectations” (Carroll, 2013, p. 606). In one recent study, Rego and Cunha (2008) examined a number of spirituality dimensions, including alignment between organizational and individual values, and found that value alignment was one of two major predictors of organizational commitment. Therefore, matching efforts have the potential to increase workplace well-being for employees as well as productivity, organizational commitment, and other positive workplace outcomes.

Another organizational level issue focuses on the role of personal values and ethics as they contribute to the workplace milieu. There has been considerable discussion in the research literature indicating that faith and spirituality in the workplace are linked to specific values such as honesty, compassion, respect, citizenship, and trustworthiness (McGhree & Grant, 2008). In addition, there is some empirical evidence demonstrating these links in persons of faith, especially with measures of spirituality, such that workplace faith has been associated with greater honesty and trust within organizations (Brown, 2003; Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002), increased kindness and fairness (Biberman & Whitty, 1997), and more organizational citizenship behavior (Nur & Organ, 2006). Faith in the workplace has also been tied to both ethical and effective leadership within organizations. Several experts, for example, argue that leaders who are more developed in terms of their spirituality are more effective in their leadership roles (Fry, 2003; Fry et al., 2005; Strack, Fottler, Wheatley, & Sodomka, 2002). In addition, there has been a push for business leaders to develop organizational models that increase ethical leadership while maintaining profits and productivity (Fry & Slocum, 2008). One such model is the Spiritual Leadership Model (SLM) which emphasizes the “fundamental needs of both leader and follower for spiritual well-being through calling and membership, to create vision and value congruence across the individual, empowered team, and organizational levels” (Fry & Cohen, 2009, p. 269). Empirical studies have consistently linked SLM strategies to improved work-related outcomes such as organizational commitment, productivity, sales growth, and employee life satisfaction although further research is needed to clarify which specific aspects of spirituality contribute to this link (Fry & Matherly, 2006; Fry & Slocum, 2008; Fry et al., 2005; Malone & Fry, 2003). Thus, faith and spirituality in the workplace may lead not only to improvements in ethical behavior on a personal level, but may also enhance the ethical climate and culture at the organizational level (McGhee & Grant, 2008).

## 6.4 Faith-Based Organizations

As we have noted throughout this book, personal faith and religious beliefs matter; they are associated with various cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. In this section we turn to the potential impact of involvement in faith-based



communities, churches, or congregations as institutionalized systems. Many churches have strong social justice and service orientations and provide a number of important resources that benefit communities. Such resources include education, psychological counseling, financial support, housing, clothing, and food (Billingsley, 1999; Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Churches also instill a sense of civic responsibility in their members which leads to volunteerism and other forms of civic involvement which, as we have noted previously, can have an impact on community belonging and influence (Maton et al., 2013; Maton & Pargament, 1987; Maton & Wells, 1995). Indeed, as Maton and colleagues (2013) note, “congregations are influenced by, and in turn influence, the communities in which they are located” (p. 613).

### ***6.4.1 Resources and Outreach Efforts***

Faith-based organizations provide a multitude of resources and outreach efforts both within congregations to benefit their members as well as resources directed at the wider community. These programs also vary according to the locus of their origin with some originating within specific congregations, others originating from outside the congregation, and still others developing as a result of collaborations between congregations and those outside the congregation (Maton et al., 2013). Resources provided by faith-based organizations include, but are not limited to, physical and mental health promotion and prevention programs, youth mentoring programs, services for immigrants including language training and refugee settlement, and outreach to the poor and homeless such as food pantries and low-income housing (Maton et al., 2013; Maton & Pargament, 1987; Maton & Wells, 1995). Unfortunately, most of these programs have not been subject to systematic, rigorous empirical evaluations of their effectiveness. Despite the lack of methodologically sound research evaluation, individuals who have received such services generally perceive them to be effective and trustworthy, even more so than services received from non faith-based organizations (Wuthnow, Hackett, & Hsu, 2004). In this section, we review the limited number of programs that have received empirical evaluation.

Several physical health promotion, prevention, and intervention programs have been implemented including those that target cancer prevention, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and weight loss, and HIV/AIDS (e.g., Agate et al., 2005; Duan, Fox, Derose, & Carson, 2000; Lopez & Castro, 2006; Samuel-Hodge et al., 2009; Yanek, Becker, Moy, Gittelsohn, & Koffman, 2001). For example, in one study researchers assessed the effectiveness of telephone counseling to promote the use of mammography screening among female church members across 30 congregations who were randomly assigned to receive either one telephone counseling session annually or to receive no telephone counseling (Duan et al., 2000). After 1 year, those who received telephone counseling were more likely to maintain mammography screening if they had received at least one mammogram during the 12 months



prior to the intervention, compared to those who received no counseling. In another study, researchers used diverse outreach efforts via a Catholic, church-based intervention that included a breast health day, subsidized access to a mobile mammography service, and educational activities (Fox, Stein, Gonzalez, Farrenkopf, & Dellinger, 1998). The intervention increased mammography screening from 12 % to 27 % among the study's low-income, Latina female sample. There is further evidence of significant positive outcomes for all of the program targets listed above (DeHaven et al., 2004), which often focus on underserved populations, suggesting that such programs have the potential to address health disparities among these groups (Maton et al., 2013; Perez & Perez-Gualdrón, 2012).

Other programs have focused on mental health although there are far fewer such programs in terms of their number and to our knowledge, there are no available outcome studies. Pastoral counseling, however, has long been a part of religious services provided by faith-based organizations whereby priests, ministers, and other religious leaders often provide emotional support to members of their congregation (Perez & Perez-Gualdrón, 2012). Additionally, faith-based organizations may provide mental health services from licensed lay and religious professionals who are members themselves of the faith community. One example of a faith-based community service focused on mental health is the Clergy Outreach and Professional Engagement (COPE) program (Milostein, Manierre, Susman, & Bruce, 2008). This program facilitates consultation and collaboration between clergy and mental health providers, allowing both groups of professionals to share care expertise with one another. This model educates mental health professionals about how faith can contribute to emotional well-being and how clergy can provide support for adherence to treatment among congregants with mental disorders. Conversely, clergy are educated about the circumstances under which they should provide referrals to clinicians and how religious involvement can help congregants with mental disorders make improvements and prevent relapse. Although no formal outcome data for this program are available, the developers of the program have provided case examples of the program's impact.

Another important resource that congregations provide to their members is various educational resources. Sikkink and Hernandez (2003) reported that the most direct connection between religious practice and educational success was the educational opportunities for parents and youth provided by congregations. Educational research points to the central role of educational opportunities outside of the classroom (Carbonaro, 1998; Lareau, 2001) and on this score churches do more than is often acknowledged. Many churches provide tutoring for children and organize trips and outings that involve educational activities such as attending museums and cultural events. Many churches also provide classes for building language skills for parents and children. Evidence of the impact of such opportunities is found in the 1998 National Congregations Study, along with its second wave in 2006–2007, conducted by Mark Chaves and colleagues (Chaves & Anderson, 2008; Chaves, Konieczny, Beyerlein, & Batman, 1999). These data show that there are abundant educational opportunities for Latinos in churches. Congregations with higher percentages of Latinos, for example, are more likely to

report that they have had a group meeting in the church for educational purposes other than religious education. Educational outcomes may be better for Latino youth in religious families for the simple reason that congregations are an important source of 'extracurricular' learning. In addition, active religious participation may increase extra-school learning because religious practices often include concrete activities that are educational, such as parents reading and discussing the Bible and other church materials with children, and children reading and memorizing the Bible, learning to sing in a choir, and so on (Galindo & Escarmilla 1995). It is also possible that the value of learning is reinforced indirectly by the importance placed within the church on reading Scriptures and being able to teach the truths of the faith. That the pastor or priest is expected to do some study before preaching the Gospel itself provides a context that subtly reinforces the ultimate value of learning. It would appear that a high regard for teaching in the church contributes to religious Latino parents' engagement in more activities with their children that enhance the family learning environment.

Members of congregations have also been involved in a variety of volunteer activities as a form of outreach to their communities. Indeed, Americans who volunteer, regardless of race or ethnicity, are more likely to do so for a religious organization than for any other type of organization (Ramakrishnan & Viramontes, 2006). One example of a volunteer activity with limited, albeit documented success, is the Amachi program which is a faith-based mentoring program. The Amachi program targets children who have an incarcerated parent and has been described by Maton and colleagues (2013). Church leaders identify qualified mentors from their congregations to engage in various activities with a child (e.g., playing sports, doing school work, etc.) which might also include attending church services or other church-related activities, although religious or spiritual activities are not necessarily emphasized or required by the program. Although largely anecdotal, evidence for the effectiveness of the program has been reported by Farley (2004) indicating increases in children's self-confidence, academic performance, behavior in school, and future orientation (as cited in Maton et al., 2013). What is less clear is how such programs differ from non faith-based community intervention programs, although there is some evidence from one study that students involved with mentors from sponsoring churches were significantly more likely than students involved with nonreligious sponsoring groups to report positive effects of mentoring, higher grades, and fewer school withdrawals (Maton & Wells, 1995).

Other evidence of faith-based volunteerism is Habitat for Humanity, one of the most well-known faith-based housing programs, and the most common form of congregational participation in housing development (Chaves, 2004). Habitat for Humanity is a Christian housing ministry that targets underprivileged families for which congregations are encouraged to contribute money, volunteers, and prayer and to engage the larger community. According to Maton and colleagues (2013) the program has "built more than 350,000 houses around the world, providing more than 1.75 million people in 3,000 communities with safe, decent, affordable shelter" (p. 621).

Most faith-based organization outreach efforts focus on serving underserved populations. Many have argued that religious organizations such as churches are an ideal method for reaching low-income and underserved populations to address mental and physical health disparities (Campbell, Hudson, Resnicow, Blakeney, Paxton, & Baskin, 2007; Maton et al., 2013; Perez & Perez-Gualdron, 2012). Collaborating with religious organizations, for example, can improve the feasibility and acceptability of health promotion interventions within communities, even when the interventions themselves are nonreligious (Campbell et al., 2007; Perez & Perez-Gualdron, 2012). Likely, faith-based health interventions that incorporate people's religious beliefs and values would more effectively produce behavioral change than secular community interventions that are merely placed in religious settings. Research on health interventions for African Americans, for example, shows that incorporating religious themes may enhance their relevance, improve participation, and boost efficacy (Campbell et al., 2007). Thus, integrating religious beliefs and values may improve the efficacy of community interventions.

In conclusion, faith-based institutions are unique venues for providing community-based intervention. Religious communities and organizations can be sources of cultural strength and promotion, which may be key to countering the potential effects of negative environments (Perez & Perez-Gualdron, 2012). Integration of religious beliefs and values into community outreach activities has the potential to create more powerful interventions by tapping the core beliefs of target populations, resulting in increased acceptability and effectiveness. Psychologists, researchers, and public health advocates can work with religious leaders to incorporate religious themes into community outreach programs to increase their effectiveness (e.g., Plante, 2012).

## 6.5 Implications

The research reviewed in this chapter points to the potential of faith to enhance community well-being, improve educational and workplace outcomes, and to capitalize on the myriad benefits offered by faith-based organizations. In this section we focus on two areas of community that have demonstrated particular promise in this area: educational and workplace settings. In addition, we mention a cautionary note about the potential for some negative impacts of faith on community settings.

### 6.5.1 *Educational Settings*

Over recent years, there have been a variety of educational practices that attempt to incorporate religion and spirituality into educational settings extending from primary to secondary to postsecondary settings (for a review, see Rockenbach &

Townsend, 2013). In addition to targeting different educational levels, these programs are also designed to not only impact students but teachers and other professionals within educational settings as well. According to Rockenbach and Townsend, these programs tend to impact one or more of five categories which all focus to some extent on *interconnectedness* which they believe is central to religion and spirituality, including

- Connecting to the self,
- Connecting to the natural world,
- Connecting to diverse others in pluralistic community,
- Connecting to others through service and social justice, and
- Connecting to spiritual support networks (p. 586).

Although there are a myriad of programs that have been developed in educational settings, very few have been evaluated for their effectiveness. One exception is the Winding Road program, an intervention designed for college students to provide support during times of spiritual struggle (Gear, Faigin, Gibbel, Krumrei, Oemig, McCarthy, & Pargament, 2008; Gear, Krumrei, & Pargament, 2009). The program is designed to help students recognize the presence and potential of spiritual struggles in one's own spiritual journey through group sessions with trained therapists. According to one study evaluating change using a pre- post-test design, student participants demonstrated a decrease in amount of psychological distress, negative affect, self-stigmatization, shame, and spiritual struggles. They also demonstrated an increase in positive affect, emotional regulation, sense of acceptance and benevolence from God, and reported living in a manner more consistent with their spiritual values (as cited in Gear et al., 2009).

Another faith-related educational program that has perhaps received the most attention is the Courage to Teach program which focuses on addressing the spiritual needs of teachers, administrators, and counselors who work with children in K-12 (Hare, Jackson, & Jackson, 2000; Palmer, Jackson, Jackson, & Sluyter, 2001). The program consists of retreats that meet quarterly over a 2-year period with the purpose of renewing the inner lives of public school educators (Palmer et al., 2001). Several evaluation studies of the program have been conducted and demonstrated the benefits of the program (Intrator & Kunzman, 2007; Palmer et al., 2001).

### 6.5.2 Workplace Settings

The empirical research has demonstrated that faith is related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and burnout, which suggests the potential of faith-related interventions to potentially enhance positive outcomes and prevent negative outcomes. For example, businesses and organizations might benefit from improved understanding of employees' faith beliefs and practices and how to adapt this understanding to various workplace policies. In addition, various interventions and initiatives might be introduced to enhance employee's sense of calling

which could impact employee productivity, organizational commitment, and job retention. One such intervention is the Calling Protocol, which includes a four-step process to help individuals identify their unique gifts, detach from distractions from using these gifts, discernment of values and feelings to serve as a guide, and identifying direction and goals. The Calling Protocol has been used in a variety of settings with success in increasing participants' sense of calling (Dreher, 2012; Dreher & Plante, 2007). In addition, promoting a sense of calling has also been linked to enhanced leadership among business professionals (Avolio, Griffith, Wernsing, & Walumbwa, 2010; McGee & Delbecq, 2003). Other workplace interventions might incorporate specific spiritual practices to help reduce burnout and enhance employees' ability to cope with various job stresses. For example, stress management classes that include spiritual practices might help those who work under stressful job conditions better cope with challenging work situations. Wasner, Longaker, Fegg, and Borasio (2005), for example, examined the impact of nondenominational spiritual practices among palliative care nurses on work-related stress. In this study, nurses who attended a spiritual care program that included stress management techniques with a spiritual focus such as mediation, journaling, and controlled breathing exercises, reported greater job satisfaction and reduced work-related stress compared to those who did not participate in the program. In addition to providing employees with personal coping resources to deal with stress, findings relating faith to the workplace also suggest the importance of religious and spiritual training for employees that inform their work with other individuals. Wasner et al. (2005), for example, found that the nurses in their study had little training on the religious and spiritual issues associated with end-of-life care. Such education and training could help reduce job stress and burnout for mental and physical health professionals who work with certain patient groups (Carroll, 2013; Wasner et al., 2005).

### 6.5.3 *A Cautionary Note*

Although the research on faith and community suggests several potential benefits, a cautionary note about some potential negative effects of faith, particularly in the workplace settings is necessary. For example, Duffy et al., (2011) have discussed the potential negative impact of calling in the workplace. They note that calling can have a 'dark side' for those who obtain jobs out of necessity that do not match with one's calling, potentially leading to job dissatisfaction and low workplace well-being. This issue may be particularly true for individuals in many countries and from various social classes where working out of necessity is the norm. One solution to this potential problem would be an emphasis by employers on optimizing organizational-employee match so that employees needs and values match those of the employer's (Carroll, 2013; Exline & Bright, 2011). In addition, career counselors could also emphasize the issue of match with counselees. Although we note again that such issues may be irrelevant to certain segments of the world population.

There is also some evidence that various spiritual struggles sometimes interfere with employee productivity (Exline & Bright, 2011). In addition, there is some research suggesting that spiritual struggles can occur for individuals who attempt to integrate their faith into their jobs, especially in women trying to balance their faith beliefs with their parental and professional roles (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Oates, Hall, Anderson, 2005; Polasky & Holahan, 1998). The impact of spiritual struggles, however, although they may be associated with decreased productivity in the short-term, may lead to positive outcomes in the long-term (Exline & Bright, 2011). Clearly more research is needed to examine organizational-employee match, as well as both the short- and long-term impact of spiritual struggles in the workplace as well as other community settings.

## 6.6 Directions for Future Research

Although faith has been shown to correlate with many positive outcomes in a variety of community settings, the empirical research on faith and community is largely in its infancy. A great deal of additional research is needed to address several of the limitations of the research addressing faith in the educational setting, the workplace, and faith-based institutions.

Similar to all areas addressed in previous chapters, there is ambiguity in defining faith across studies addressing the various areas of community. This issue is particularly relevant in research addressing faith in the workplace where most research has used quite broad definitions of spirituality to the virtual exclusion of more traditional measures of religiosity and often to the exclusion of any reference to the sacred. In reviewing the research on workplace spirituality, for example, Giacalone and colleagues state: “Spirituality is found in pursuit of a vision of service to others; through humility as having the capacity to regard oneself as an individual equal in value to other individuals; through charity, or altruistic love; and through veracity beyond basic truth telling to engage the capacity to see things exactly as they are, freed from subjective distortions” (Giacalone et al., 2005, p. 517). Additional research is necessary not only to incorporate broad definitions of faith, but to compare outcomes for the various dimensions of faith and spirituality.

In addition to definitional challenges, the research on faith and community is plagued by several major weaknesses related to methodology, validity, theory, and measurement (Campbell et al., 2007; Giacalone et al., 2005; Hill et al., 2013; Karakas, 2009). Much of the research on faith and community, for example, is atheoretical, which limits its contribution to the specific area of its focus as well as to the field of psychology more generally. One exception is some of the research on faith in educational and faith-based institutions which has made use of social capital theory. In addition, the majority of research on faith in community has focused on U.S. populations and on Western religious traditions. Some of the research on faith in educational and faith-based institutions focuses specifically on Latino and

African American groups, but more cross-cultural research is needed that includes different ethnic groups, non U.S. samples, and a diverse range of religious traditions. Additional research is also needed to improve upon all of the methodological limitations of past research in order to move the field forward in terms of basic knowledge and the implications of that knowledge.

In addition to general methodological weaknesses that should be addressed in future research; there are also specific substantive criticisms of current research that should direct future efforts. Research is needed, for example, to examine the specific features of faith-based processes and outcomes such as examining both similarities and differences in religious and nonreligious sources of influence on well-being (Maton & Wells, 1995). One question that has not yet been sufficiently addressed in the research literature is whether the faith-based communities/organizations offer anything distinct from other types of communities. Some evidence is available about the unique contributions of faith in other areas of research with regard to religious motivations and values, religious coping, and spiritual struggles and distress (Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani, 1998; Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005; Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, Swank, Scott, & Emery, 1999; Pargament, Cole, VandeCreek, Belavich, Brant, & Perez, 1999), but more research is needed that focuses on the community level. Some evidence suggests that faith at the community level can uniquely impact physical health outcomes. Seeman, Kaplan, Knudsen, Cohen, and Guralnik (1987) examined the relationship between faith-related social ties and mortality which showed that membership in a church predicted longevity, whereas membership in other types of groups such as labor, political, service, were not significantly related to mortality risk for the elderly. Additional research is needed on faith-related social support/ties that focus on various community-level outcomes (for an exception see Kodzi, Gyimah, Emina, & Ezeh, 2011).

There is also a need to expand research efforts to other topics. For example, most research on faith in community settings focuses on the individual within such organizations. For example, research on faith in the workplace examines the impact of faith at the individual level of employees. More research is needed to examine how faith impacts employers and leaders and their role at the organizational level and how faith impacts group-level outcomes in the workplace. One particular challenge in this area will be how to measure group and organizational levels of religion and spirituality (Giacalone et al., 2005; Hill et al., 2013). Additional research is also needed that focus on group-level outcomes outside of community institutions, within the general community. A recent example of such an effort is a study that examined religious coping and meaning-making among a group of residents who were forced to relocate from the Gaza Strip (Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014). The authors concluded that in collective community events, meaning-making processes take place not only at the individual level but at the collective level as well.

Additionally, there is a need for more research that focuses on cultural levels of analysis of the positive impact of faith in communities. One study, for example, examined the role of sociocultural moderators on the effects of religion (Sasaki & Kim, 2011). These researchers examined the interaction of culture and religion by



comparing individuals from individualistic cultures, such as European Americans to individuals from collectivistic cultures such as East Asians. The researchers hypothesized that individuals from individualistic cultures would be more motivated toward personal agency, whereas individuals from collectivistic cultures would be more motivated to maintain social relationships. The researchers conducted a content analysis of mission statements on church websites in both the United States and Korea for various themes related to both personal agency (e.g., spiritual and personal growth and acceptance) and social affiliation (e.g., increasing and maintain close ties within the church community) and found that U.S. websites contained more themes of personal agency than did Korean websites, while Korean websites contained more themes of social affiliation than did U.S. websites.

Finally, in addition to the need for more research that focuses on organizational, institutional, and cultural levels of analysis of the positive impact of faith, there are additional community organizations and institutions that should be studied in which faith may lead to positive outcomes. The positive impact of faith, for example, could be studied in correctional settings, military settings, and governmental agencies. Some work in these areas has begun to appear although more research is needed to examine these and other community settings (e.g., Foy, Drescher, & Smith, 2013; Johnson, 2013). Although efforts to understand the positive impact of faith and community is young, research efforts are increasing and hold promise for the role of faith in promoting positive communities.

## 6.7 Chapter Summary

One critique of positive psychology is that there is too much emphasis on the individual and too little focus on positive societies and communities. In this chapter we focused on why faith matters to community functioning in general, as well as why faith matters to functioning in particular settings and institutions within the larger community, such as schools, the workplace, and religious institutions. Our discussion include two levels of faith-related community outcomes including group-level outcomes as well as individual-level outcomes occurring within the context of a community or institution.

There are several theoretical arguments for faith being important to optimal human functioning and well-being at the community level. First, faith relates to communities because it can promote social well-being. Second, the field of community psychology provides a framework for understanding how faith can create a sense of community and belonging. Third, faith is relevant to communities because it can bolster social capital or connections among and within social networks that creates social cohesion. These theoretical arguments contribute to a working model of how faith operates in communities to enhance well-being at a community level. There is considerable empirical research supporting the notion that faith enhances community well-being generally, as well as within specific institutional contexts.



Evidence is also accumulating to support the positive impact of faith within specific institutions including educational, workplace, and faith-based organizational settings. In recent years, for example, there has been an emerging shift in the views of religion and spirituality's role in education. Research in this area has primarily focused on specific educational outcomes such as education satisfaction, educational aspirations, and academic achievement. Although several positive relationships have been noted between faith and educational outcomes, less is known about the reasons for these outcomes. The reasons for the impact of faith on educational variables, whether measured as religious school attendance, attendance at religious services, or personal religious commitment, have only rarely been studied. There are several possible reasons that have been proposed for this association. First, it may be that students of faith adhere to a religious work ethic, often referred to as the Protestant work ethic, but which likely extends to other religious groups. A second reason includes the idea that religious people are more likely to have various personality traits, such as an internal locus of control, which has been associated with academic success. Finally, religious school attendance and personal religious commitment may be associated with academic success because religious individuals tend to avoid various behaviors (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse, teenage sexual behavior) that might be harmful to academic achievement. The impact of faith on educational variables may also be due to differences in school cultures or the promotion of parental involvement.

A positive psychology approach to the work setting includes addressing faith and spirituality in the workplace. Faith and spirituality are important concepts in the workplace setting, in part, because of the role of work in providing a sense of meaning and purpose to one's life, what is often referred to as one's sense of calling. Scholars are only just beginning to extend positive psychology approaches to the work setting to include addressing religion and spirituality in the work place, although the topic of workplace spirituality is a fast growing area of new research. The work that has been conducted on this topic focuses primarily on workplace behaviors and attitudes of both employees and managers, as well as the role of religion and spirituality at the organizational level. Research on faith, calling, and sanctification relate positively to work satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job retention. Recent research also suggests the important role of faith as a method of coping with job stress and as a tool for enhancing organizational leadership.

Evidence is also appearing to suggest the potential positive impact of involvement in faith-based communities, churches, and congregations as institutionalized systems. Many churches have strong social justice and service orientations and provide a number of important resources that benefit communities. Such resources include education, psychological counseling, financial support, housing, clothing, and food. Churches also instill a sense of civic responsibility in their members which leads to volunteerism and other forms of civic involvement which, can have an impact on community belonging and influence.

The research reviewed in this chapter suggests two areas that have demonstrated particular promise for interventions to enhance the impact of faith on community:

educational and workplace settings. Over recent years, there have been a variety of educational practices that attempt to incorporate religion and spirituality into educational settings extending from primary to secondary to postsecondary settings. Although there are a myriad of programs that have been developed in educational settings, very few have been evaluated for their effectiveness. Two exceptions are the Winding Road program and the Courage to Teach program which have shown promise as faith-based educational interventions. Because the empirical research has demonstrated that faith is related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and burnout, potential also exists for faith-related interventions to enhance positive outcomes and prevent negative outcomes in the workplace. One intervention that shows promise is the Calling Protocol which is designed to enhance employee's sense of calling which could impact employee productivity, organizational commitment, and job retention. The Calling Protocol has been used in a variety of settings with success in increasing participants' sense of calling.

Although faith has been shown to correlate with many positive outcomes in a variety of community and institutional settings, the empirical research on faith and community is largely in its infancy. A great deal of additional research is needed to address several of the limitations of current research. Similar to other topics discussed in this book, there is ambiguity in defining faith across studies addressing the various areas of community. Additional research is necessary not only to incorporate broad definitions of faith, but to compare outcomes for the various dimensions of faith and spirituality. In addition to definitional challenges, the research on faith and community is plagued by several major weaknesses related to methodology, validity, theory, and measurement. In addition to general methodological weaknesses that should be addressed in future research, there are also specific substantive criticisms of current research that should direct future efforts. Research is needed, for example, to examine the specific features of faith-based processes and outcomes such as examining both similarities and differences in religious and nonreligious sources of influence on well-being. One question that has not yet been sufficiently addressed in the research literature is whether the faith-based communities/organizations offer anything distinct from other types of communities. There is also a need to expand research to include a focus not only on the individual within such organizations but to group-level outcomes within both institutions and the broader community. In addition, there is a need for more research that focuses on cultural levels of analysis of the positive impact of faith in communities. Finally, there are additional community organizations and institutions that should be studied in which faith may lead to positive outcomes. The positive impact of faith, for example, could be studied in correctional settings, military settings, and governmental agencies. Some work in these areas has begun to appear although more research is needed to examine these and other community settings. Although efforts to understand the positive impact of faith and community is young, research efforts are increasing and hold promise for the role of faith in promoting positive communities.

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## Chapter 7

# Final Reflections on Faith and Positive Human Functioning

Throughout this book, our positive psychology focus has emphasized the importance of examining positive emotions, behaviors, cognitions, relationships, and communities within a faith context. In general, the field of positive psychology is committed to examining the subjective level of the human experience, which includes positive emotions such as happiness, contentment, life satisfaction, optimism, hope, confidence, self-esteem, love, and gratitude. Indeed, one of the most significant contributions of positive psychology to the broader field of psychology is the notion that focusing on positive emotions is as valuable as focusing on negative emotions. In addition to positive emotions, virtues reflected in prosocial behaviors, such as helping behavior and forgiveness, are important to the field of positive psychology because they are important to a life of engagement and meaning and contribute not only to optimal individual functioning but to the greater good of society. Positive psychology also emphasizes a focus on dyadic and societal levels, including the development and maintenance of positive relationships, institutions, civic virtues, and healthy families and work environments. As we have noted throughout this book, faith has been associated with various forms of optimal human functioning in all of these diverse areas.

In this chapter, we summarize common themes about what is known with regard to faith and its relationship to optimal human functioning. In particular, we discuss the strongest findings relating faith to optimal psychological functioning while also highlighting areas in which findings are equivocal and cautionary. We also address common themes across the research literature identifying potential mechanisms associated with faith and optimal human functioning. In addition, we provide a summary of the clinical implications of this knowledge to the field of psychology generally, and to the field of Positive Psychology specifically. Finally, we address methodological limitations of current research and offer suggestions for further advancing this research field.

## 7.1 Robust Findings Relating Faith to Optimal Functioning

One of the most consistent findings associated with faith and optimal human functioning is that faith is related to positive emotional outcomes. A number of systematic reviews and meta-analyses have repeatedly demonstrated that faith is linked to mental health as well as numerous positive emotions such as hope, optimism, present and future life satisfaction, happiness, higher morale, purpose, and meaning (Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). For example, Koenig et al. (2001) conducted a systematic review of studies relating religion to mental health and of the 102 studies relating faith to positive outcomes, 79 % found a positive association. A more recent updated review reported nearly identical findings (Koenig et al., 2012). In addition, these links tend to remain after controlling for relevant demographic variables such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, region, socio-economic status, marital status, and child-bearing status. Finally, there is considerable evidence, based on longitudinal studies, that faith plays a role in *eliciting* these positive outcomes. Among the largest reviews of literature, longitudinal studies showed similar positive links between faith and positive emotional outcomes among both adolescent and adult samples (Bowman & Small, 2012; Childs, 2010; Dillon & Wink, 2007; Headey, Schupp, Tucci, & Wagner, 2010; Krause & Hayward, 2013). For example, among the prospective studies relating faith to life satisfaction reviewed by Koenig et al., (2001), 83 % indicated that faith predicted greater well-being over time.

Although research has consistently demonstrated a link between faith and positive emotional outcomes, the size of this relationship averaged across studies typically ranges from small to moderate (Sawatzky, Ratner, & Chiu, 2005; Yonker, Schnabelrauch, & DeHaan, 2012). There are several potential reasons that the relationship between faith and positive emotional outcomes is only small to moderate, including the various ways that faith has been defined. It would appear, for example, that certain aspects of faith, such as internalizing the beliefs and values of one's faith and being personally motivated in one's faith, are more closely related to well-being than particular religious ideologies or participating in religious activities (e.g., Hackney & Sanders, 2003). In addition, research is only beginning to explore more sophisticated links between faith and emotion, such as the unique impact of emotions operationalized in explicitly faith-based ways, emotions specifically directed at the sacred, and emotions evoked by religious or spiritual practices; preliminary findings are promising.

Another consistent finding in the research literature relates faith to positive behaviors. Studies have found links between faith and health behaviors such as eating a healthy diet, exercising, engaging in preventive medical screenings, and adhering to medical recommendations (e.g., Benjamins, Trinitapoli, & Ellison, 2006; Holt, Haire-Joshu, Lukwago, Lewellyn, & Kreuter, 2005; Park Edmondson, Hale-Smith, & Blank, 1999; Strawbridge, Shema, Cohen, & Kaplan, 2001; Wallace & Forman, 1998). These relationships have been found consistently among samples of college students, the elderly, and the general community across a variety of faith measures assessing religious activities, spiritual experiences, and faith beliefs.

Other robust findings relating faith and behavior have been noted in the association between faith and a reduction in both criminal/delinquent behavior and alcohol/drug use. Decades of research examining the relationship between faith and these behavioral outcomes indicates that faith is an important negative predictor of these behaviors, especially among individuals who are actively involved in religious activities. Koenig and his colleagues (2012), for example, reviewed the recent literature on the relationship between faith and alcohol/drug use and found for alcohol use or abuse, 86 % of studies investigating a faith-alcohol connection reported less alcohol use/abuse among more religious individuals. In terms of drug use or abuse, they found that 84 % of studies investigating the faith-drug connection reported less drug use/abuse among more religious individuals. These findings have been demonstrated among both adolescents and adults and across a number of different countries and do not seem to be mediated by social support or peer or familial influence (Koenig et al., 2012). Similarly, a review of the research literature on faith and crime/delinquency since 2000, approximately 80 % of studies found an inverse relationship between faith and crime/delinquency (Koenig et al., 2012). In addition, longitudinal data suggest that faith serves to inhibit criminal and delinquent behaviors, at least in the short-term (e.g., at 12 month follow-ups). The findings relating faith to crime/delinquency have been demonstrated across a number of different countries (Baier & Wright, 2001; Barber, 2001; Stack & Kposowa, 2006; Torgler, 2006) and among not only youth but adults as well (Benda, Toombs, & Peacock, 2003).

Although the majority of studies on alcohol/drug use and crime/delinquency show an inverse relationship with faith, the relationships tend to be modest. Most of these studies have defined faith in terms of religious attendance with frequency of prayer, belief in a supernatural being, religious salience, and religious denomination also being common. Indeed, with few exceptions, research on links between faith and these behaviors has focused primarily on more traditional measures of religious faith rather than on spirituality or various dimensions or religious orientation. In addition, the method used to measure the behavioral outcomes may impact the relationship between faith and these behaviors. Evidence seems to suggest, for example, that victimless crimes, such as gambling, are more likely to be deterred by religion than crimes, such as theft or physical assault, and the deterrent effect of religion seems to increase when individuals are immersed within a religious community (Baier & Wright, 2001; Stark, 1996; Stark, Kent, & Doyle, 1982). Although a relationship between faith and these behaviors is clear, it is less clear which aspects of faith involvement are most protective against which specific aspects of crime/delinquency and alcohol/drug use.

Research has also consistently shown the positive impact of various faith-related cognitions. For example, forming positive cognitions about a deity is associated with positive affect, life satisfaction, higher self-esteem and prosocial behaviors and attitudes (Benson & Spilka, 1973; Buri & Mueller, 1993; Francis, Gibson, & Robbins, 2001; Johnson, Li, Cohen, & Okun, 2013; Mendonca, Oakes, Ciarrocchi, Sneck, & Gillespie, 2007; Wiegand & Weiss, 2006). In addition, making use of conservative analyses, research examining spiritual appraisals, such as

sanctification, has consistently demonstrated that faith-based cognitions have powerful implications for people's lives. Viewing God as manifest in an aspect of life or imbuing an aspect of life with sacred qualities has been associated with positive behavior investments, higher levels of satisfaction, and positive emotions related these aspects of life (e.g., Emmons & Kneezel, 2005; Hall, Oates, Anderson, & Willingham, 2012; Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011; Jacobson, Hall, & Anderson, 2013; Mahoney, Carels, et al., 2005; Mahoney, Pargament, et al., 2005; Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005; Walker, Jones, Wuensch, Aziz, & Cope, 2008). Finally, using faith to cast stressors in a benevolent spiritual light has shown to be a powerful coping method, relating to positive mental health, positive affect, stress-related growth, and spiritual growth (Koenig, Pargament, & Nielsen, 1998; Loewenthal, MacLeod, Goldblatt, Lubitsh, & Valentine, 2000; Mickley, Pargament, Brant, & Hipp, 1998; Parenteau et al., 2011; Pargament et al., 1990; Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000; Thombre, Sherman, & Simonton, 2010).

Beyond faith-based cognitions, engaging in cognitive faith practices, such as prayer and meditation, have been associated with a host of personal benefits, such as psychological well-being and sense of purpose (Francis & Evans, 1995) and interpersonal benefits (Lambert, Fincham, DeWall, Pond, & Beach, 2013). There is a substantial body of research linking many forms of prayer to positive outcome measures. The research literature on meditation is also substantial, but includes both faith-based and secular forms of meditation. Less research has examined explicitly spiritual forms of meditation, and very little research has compared the effects of spiritual versus secular forms of meditation. However, there is at least some indication that faith-based meditation practices offers some unique benefits from mediation practices that are not explicitly religious or spiritual in nature (Wachholtz & Pargament, 2005, 2008).

The literature on faith and relationships suggests that faith has much to offer for well-functioning relationships. Although there is a dearth of information regarding the role of faith in non-familial relationships, an extensive body of research supports the substantial impact faith can have for couples and families. Faith seems to impact how satisfied people are with relationships, how committed individuals are to relationships, how much people invest in relationships, and how people treat one another in relationships.

We have reviewed how specific religious beliefs, engaging in prayer, involvement in a religious community, and shared religious activities each contribute to the quality of marital relationships, including greater marital commitment and fidelity; more marital satisfaction; more emotional support, empathy, love, and affection; better communication, collaboration, and problem solving; greater sexual intimacy and satisfaction reported by couples (e.g., Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore, 2007; Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Goddard, Marshall, Olson, & Dennis, 2012; Hernandez, et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 1999; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008) and their children (Smith & Kim, 2003). It seems that shared religious beliefs and activities in particular provide a greater contribution to healthy marriages than the faith beliefs and practices of each partner (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009).

Research has also examined how faith beliefs and practices relate to the quality of parenting, parent-child relationships, and overall family well-being. Numerous faith variables, such as importance of religion, religious beliefs, involvement in a religious community, and prayer, are linked to the quality of parenting practices, parent-child relationships, and family satisfaction. Religious beliefs, for example, have been associated with favorable parenting practices across numerous studies involving both parental and youth reports (e.g., Hertel & Donahue, 1995; Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006; Wilcox, 1998). The majority of research has examined how the faith characteristics of parents impact family relationships, however, the few studies that have examined faith variables among youth indicate that this is also relevant to the quality of parent-child relationships and satisfaction with family life among family members (Muller & Ellison, 2001; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006).

Among the research on faith and relationships, a trend is that relational faith variables, rather than individual faith variables, are the best predictors of the quality of relationships. Relational faith variables include characteristics such as sharing the same religious beliefs with a relationship partner, engaging in religious activities together, drawing God or faith directly into conversations, drawing on God in one's attempts to resolve conflicts, and viewing a relationship as sacred, or viewing God as central to the relationship. These relational faith variables seem to predict relationship strengths and well-being beyond the variance that is accounted for by traditional faith variables, such as importance of religion and frequency of church attendance or prayer.

Our community level analysis revealed the importance of faith in various community and institutional settings. The areas including the greatest amount of empirical research with the most consistent findings include faith as it relates to educational and workplace settings. The most significant outcomes relating faith and education demonstrate that faith is associated with specific positive educational outcomes such as increased education satisfaction, educational aspirations, and academic achievement (e.g., Mooney, 2010; Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003; UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2005). In these studies, definitions of faith varied greatly to include engagement in religious or spiritual practices (e.g., worship, meditation, prayer, etc.), parent religiosity, personal religious commitment, and religious school attendance. Although positive relationships were noted between faith and educational outcomes, less is known about the reasons for these outcomes.

In terms of faith in the workplace, several studies have examined self-reported religiosity and spirituality and found associations with positive workplace outcomes such as greater job satisfaction, increased organizational commitment, lower turnover and burnout, more effective home-work balance, and enhanced productivity (e.g., Dlugos & Friedlander, 2001; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003; Nur & Organ, 2006; Sagie, 1993; Sikorska-Simmons, 2005). Studies that have examined the impact of having a sense of calling on employees have consistently found that having a sense of calling is associated with a number of positive outcomes, such

as higher levels of job satisfaction, job motivation, career and organizational commitment, career decision making, citizenship behavior and lower levels of stress and frustration (e.g., Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011; Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2009; Serow, 1994; Sikorska-Simmons, 2005; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Sanctification of one's work, or viewing it as sacred in some way, has also been found to relate to positive outcomes associated with the workplace. In one study, for example, those who sanctified their work were more committed to their organizations, less intent on leaving their jobs, and more satisfied with their jobs (Walker et al., 2008). These studies suggest that personal faith, as well as experiencing one's work as a calling or sacred activity is associated with greater commitment and satisfaction with one's job or career.

As summarized, there is substantial research showing consistent links between faith variables and positive outcome measures on individual, interpersonal, and community levels. Although research has consistently demonstrated a link between faith and these outcomes, the size of this relationship typically ranges from small to moderate. The size of the impact of faith on outcome variables depends on the way the outcome variables are measured. Stronger effect sizes, for example, appear to be present for measures of faith that are more complex and specifically integrated into a person's living. For example, one measure of faith associated with robust findings across each of the research areas discussed in this volume is sanctification, referring to perceptions that God is manifest in an aspect of life or that an aspect of life is sacred. This is a cognitive appraisal that can be applied to any aspect of life, and has been linked to individual's emotional well-being, relationship success, and career outcomes. On a practical level, it makes sense that sanctifying an aspect of life will relate to positive outcomes in that domain. For example, viewing God as manifest in one's marriage is related to better quality marriages, viewing parenting as holy is associated with better parent-child relationships, and viewing one's job as a calling from God is associated with investing more in one's work. In addition, sanctification results in deriving greater emotional satisfaction from these domains of life. Finally, the benefits of sanctification are maintained even after controlling for various potential confounding variables such as demographic characteristics, general religiosity, and personality traits. Thus, it is clear that measuring forms of faith that are well-integrated into a person's life is associated with stronger links to positive outcomes than merely measuring general faith characteristics, such as religious affiliation or frequency of church attendance.

## 7.2 Equivocal and Cautionary Findings

Although there are many areas in which faith demonstrates a clear positive impact on various emotions, behaviors, cognitions, relationships, and communities, there are also some areas of research in which the findings are not consistent, or in some rarer cases, suggest the potential negative impact of faith. For example, a recent review examining the relationship between faith and emotional well-being,



indicated that 78 % of quantitative studies found a positive association, 5 % reported mixed or complex findings, 17 % reported no association, and 1 % found a negative relationship between faith and greater well-being (Koenig et al. 2012). In the following sections we summarize areas of research with equivocal or negative findings associated with faith and a variety of psychological outcomes.

### 7.2.1 *Equivocal Findings*

There are a few areas in which research has uncovered equivocal or mixed findings, with regard to the relationship between faith and psychological outcomes. Allport (1954), for example, noted that the role of faith in prejudicial thinking is paradoxical as its influence is important, but works in contradictory directions. Some forms of faith are ethnocentric, promoting attitudes of exclusivity and prejudice, whereas others are universalistic, instilling attitudes of acceptance of others in thoughts and behaviors.

Along these lines, it is possible for cognitions to take either a positive or negative faith tone. For example, while we have described many ways that sanctification and other faith-based appraisals are associated with a host of positive outcome measures, in parallel, people can interpret experiences as a sacred loss or desecration, people can demonize others or events, or people can form negative conceptualizations of God, such as viewing God as angry, vindictive, or weak. These cognitions are associated with unfavorable outcomes such as depression, distress, anxiety, dysfunctional approaches to conflict, and illness (e.g., Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Benson & Spilka, 1973; Exline, 2013; Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2004; Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011; Parenteau et al., 2011; Schaap-Jonker, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Verhagen, & Zock, 2000). Paradoxically, negative spiritual appraisals have been associated with not only negative, but also positive outcome measures, such as posttraumatic growth, sense of purpose in life, positive spiritual change, and spiritual growth (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Koenig et al., 1998; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1999; Pargament et al., 2000; Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005). Thus, it seems that negative faith-based cognitions represent arduous struggles that simultaneously become pathways to growth and therefore greater well-being.

Some of the most equivocal research findings are associated with links between faith and various behaviors. Studies that have examined the relationship between faith and honesty, for example, have found that religious respondents often, although not consistently, are less likely to cheat or engage in deception compared to their nonreligious peers. Studies focusing on academically dishonest behavior, such as plagiarism or cheating on exams, among religious high school and college students tend to find that the majority of students self-report engaging in some form of academic dishonesty (e.g., Bruggeman & Hart, 1996; Spilka & Loffredo, 1982). In contrast, several studies investigating the relationship between



personal religiousness and cheating on income taxes among adults have found that religious persons are less likely to report cheating on their taxes (Grasmick, Bursik, & Cochran, 1991; Stack & Kposowa, 2006; Torgler, 2006). In an effort to overcome the biases inherent in self-report studies of honest behavior, a few researchers have used overt behavioral measures of cheating which have yielded mixed findings (Perrin, 2000; Williamson & Assadi, 2005). Most of the studies indicating no faith-honesty connection, whether based on self-report or behavioral measures, were conducted with children or high school or college students, which limit their generalizability and may produce developmentally specific outcomes. In addition, most studies also examined dishonesty as some form of cheating in these populations where such behaviors are somewhat normative. Indeed, research suggests that academic dishonesty is quite common, with 83 % of college students in one study admitting at least one act of academic dishonesty such as plagiarism (Cochran, Chamlin, Wood, & Sellers, 1999). Across studies there seems to be a confound between study design and age of participants as most of the self-report studies finding significant faith-honesty connections were conducted with older individuals while the behavioral outcome studies finding no significant faith-honesty link were conducted with students. It may be that the level of faith and moral maturity of participants are impacting these outcomes.

Research examining the link between faith and helping behavior has also been equivocal with findings that are largely either inconclusive or the patterns have been characterized as weak, albeit positive (Midlarsky, Mullin, & Barkin, 2012; Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2005). These equivocal findings are, in large part, associated with the fact that although people of faith are slightly more likely to help others, their willingness to help can be moderated by various contextual factors (Duriez, 2004; Saroglou, 2013; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). One such contextual factor is the target of the helping behavior such that religiosity appears to be positively related to willingness to help acquaintances and relatives but unrelated to helping strangers. However, the definitions of faith used in these studies should be considered. In one study, for example, researchers found that when religiousness was isolated from spirituality, people high on religiousness engaged in helping behaviors toward loved ones but not strangers, whereas those high on spirituality showed helping behaviors toward both loved ones and strangers (Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschuere, & Dernelle, 2005). In another study, individuals who held orthodox religious beliefs (e.g., literal religious thinking) were found to be less willing to help homeless or illegal immigrant targets than those holding other religious attitudes (Pichon & Saroglou, 2009). Taken together, these findings provide several insights into the nature of the faith-helping connection. First, these studies suggest that a connection between faith and helping exists, with people of faith being somewhat more likely to be helpful than their nonreligious counterparts. However, contextual factors are important and may contribute to findings of weak or modest relationships between faith and helping behavior because helping behavior appears not to be unconditional. Many people of faith, for example, help under circumstances in which the target of the helping behavior is familiar. This may be due to the fact that people of faith value interpersonal

relationships, social approval, and in-group versus out-group affiliation (Saroglou, 2013). Second, people of certain religious orientations, such as orthodoxy and fundamentalism, are particularly less likely to engage in helping behavior when the targets are unfamiliar or hold values that are inconsistent with their own. This may be due to the fact that religious people are less likely to help when the person in need exhibits behavior that violates a religious standard (Jackson & Esses, 1997; Thurston, 2000). Another possibility is that, although religions generally value benevolence, or attention to the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent contact, the same is not true of the principle of universalism, which includes attention to the welfare of all people (Pichon & Saroglou, 2009). It is also clear that the methods used to operationalize faith impacts the various findings associated with the faith-helping connection.

Research examining the link between faith and forgiveness has also been equivocal and patterns have often been characterized as positive, but weak. According to a recent review by McCullough and colleagues (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2005), across a wide range of studies conducted over the past three decades, “people with high levels of religious participation, religious salience, or religious commitment tend to be more forgiving than are their less religious counterparts” (p. 399). These outcomes are consistent across a variety of religions including Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions (Azar & Mullet, 2001; Cohen, Malka, Rozin, & Cherfas, 2006). However, studies which have measured forgiveness as a state via self-reported forgiveness to real-life transgressions have often failed to find a faith-forgiveness relationship. For example, in several recent studies, participants’ religiosity turned out to be unrelated to behavioral forgiveness when measured as low retaliation to a specific offense (Greer, Berman, Varan, Bobrycki, & Watson, 2005; Leach, Berman, & Eubanks, 2008; Saroglou, Corneille, & Van Capellen, 2009). Overall, these findings suggest that faith is positively associated with forgiveness, but only to a limited degree. In addition, the nature of this relationship depends on the ways in which both faith and forgiveness are measured. Measures of forgiveness that assess one’s general tendency to forgive across multiple situations and relationships tend to be associated with faith, and in particular, intrinsic faith orientations. In addition, specific quest dimensions are associated with dispositional forgiveness such as efforts devoted to examining religious teachings. In contrast, findings relating to measures of forgiveness that assess one’s ability to forgive specific offenses demonstrate more mixed findings with some studies demonstrating a positive association between faith and forgiveness and others demonstrating a negative association. Again, specific quest dimensions, such as the tendency to focus on the message behind biblical teachings rather than the literal interpretation, are associated with state forgiveness. There is also preliminary evidence pointing to the potential for various quest dimensions to hamper forgiveness, whether measured as a state or trait, such as openness to change and examination of religious beliefs, feelings of religious doubt, and linking one’s religion to questions of meaning and purpose. Additional research and theory are needed to understand the complex relationships between different aspects of faith and forgiveness, as well as the complexities inherent in their relationship to each other.

Equivocal findings have also been noted among some of the research addressing faith and relationships. When it comes to friendships, some research has shown that religion can break social class barriers (Wuthnow, 2003), but other studies have shown that religion is associated with racially homogamous friendships (Park, 2012). A study of racially diverse students from 28 colleges in the U.S. indicated that self-rated religiosity, frequency of religious service attendance, and involvement in a religious student organization were each predictive of fewer interracial friendships (Park, 2012). This is likely due to the fact that the vast majority of religious institutions are racially homogeneous. The implications of such religious homophily are that it places limits on people's social worlds, constricting the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience.

The role of faith in marital relationships can also be quite complex. For example, religious service attendance and biblical beliefs have generally been tied to lower self-reported extramarital sex in national surveys (Burdette et al., 2007; Cochran, Chamlin, Beeghley, & Fenwick, 2004), but the odds of an affair paradoxically increase for those who frequently attend church but don't feel close to God, and for low attenders who do feel close to God (Atkins & Kessel, 2008). This reveals that to understand the role of faith in relationships, it is important to pay attention not only to global measures of faith such as religious service attendance and general religious beliefs, but also to individuals' personal religious experiences, such as the amount of closeness felt toward God. In addition, dyadic faith factors should be considered as well. Some ways in which individuals turn to religion in response to marital conflict can be helpful while others, such as triangulating God into the relationship in a negative way, can be harmful (Butler et al., 2002; Gardner, Butler, & Seedall, 2008). In particular, differences within a couple regarding religious issues are associated with more arguing (Curtis & Ellison, 2002).

In conclusion, although equivocal findings have been noted in several research areas relating faith to optimal human functioning, it appears that such findings are associated with various methodological issues. Findings are inconsistent because of the various ways in which faith is defined across studies. Another complicating factor appears to be the various ways in which the psychological outcomes associated with faith are measured. Finally, for some research areas there seems to be a confound between the age of the participants being studied and the method for measuring psychological outcomes (e.g., most of the self-report studies finding significant faith-honesty connections were conducted with older individuals while the studies using behavioral measure that find no significant faith-honesty link were conducted with students). Clearly additional research is needed to clarify these equivocal findings by addressing these methodological concerns.

## ***7.2.2 Cautionary Notes About Faith and Human Functioning***

As we have noted throughout this volume, positive psychology as a discipline does not deny negative aspects of life. Rather, the emphasis is on the fact that what is

good about life is as important as what is negative, and therefore deserves equal attention from psychologists. For this reason, the emphasis in this volume has been on research that demonstrates links between faith and positive psychological outcomes while noting some exceptions. It is important to acknowledge that research has also revealed some areas of concern when it comes to faith and psychological outcomes because public policy officials, clinicians, researchers, and the general public should be aware of these potentially harmful aspects of faith as they can inhibit the path to optimal human functioning and flourishing.

For example, while less common, there are some forms of faith that are associated with negative emotions and declines in well-being. This is one reason that the averaged links between faith and well-being tend to be small. Considering only the forms of faith that are positively associated with well-being would likely result in a stronger, positive relationship. Nevertheless, the fact that distinct forms of faith are associated with less well-being should not be overlooked. For example, parallel to the benefits of positive emotional experiences of God, discontent toward God is associated with psychological distress, hopelessness, depressive symptoms, and feelings of guilt (e.g., Braam, Schaap-Jonker, Mooi, De Ritter, Beekman, & Deeg, 2008; Eurelings-Bontekoe, Steeg, & Verschuur, 2005).

Furthermore, it is also important to acknowledge that faith can also be linked to unhelpful cognitions. For example, religious content can be involved in the symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, as is seen in scrupulosity, where unwanted and intrusive religious thoughts are accompanied by compulsive behaviors (see Himle, Chatters, Taylor, & Nguyen, 2011 for a review). In addition, individuals can engage in negative forms of religious coping, such as passively waiting for God to solve a problem or becoming spiritually discontent. Such religious struggles have complex implications for people's lives including, depression, anxiety, and distress (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005).

The potential negative impact of faith variables is also relevant to children. As we have noted, although many aspects of faith are beneficial to children and families, this is not true for all faith-related variables. For example, open marital conflict about religious issues has negative effects on children (Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin, 2008). Among adolescents, greater private religiousness seems to protect those exposed to high levels of stress from emotional and behavioral problems, but higher levels of family religiousness can exacerbate their emotional problems (Ahmed, Fowler, & Toro, 2011). Also, the degree of similarity in faith between parents and adolescents is relevant. Daughters who view their religious beliefs as similar to their parents' religious beliefs perceive their relationship with their parents to be warmer (Okagaki & Bevis, 1999), but parent-child relationships can suffer when parents value or draw on faith more than their adolescents do (Stokes & Regnerus, 2009).

Although the research on faith and community suggests several potential benefits, a cautionary note about some potential negative effects of faith, particularly in workplace settings, is also necessary. For example, Duffy et al. (2011) have discussed the potential negative impact of calling in the workplace. They note that calling can have a 'dark side' for those who obtain jobs out of necessity that do not match with one's calling, potentially leading to job dissatisfaction and low

workplace well-being. This issue may be particularly true for individuals in many countries and from various social classes where working out of necessity is the norm. One solution to this potential problem would be an emphasis by employers on optimizing organizational-employee match so that employees needs and values match those of the employer's (Carroll, 2013; Exline & Bright, 2011). There is also some evidence that various spiritual struggles sometimes interfere with employee productivity (Exline & Bright, 2011). In addition, there is some research suggesting that spiritual struggles can occur for individuals who attempt to integrate their faith into their jobs, especially in women trying to balance their faith beliefs with their parental and professional roles (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Oates, Hall, Anderson, 2005; Polasky & Holahan, 1998). The impact of spiritual struggles, however, although they may be associated with decreased productivity in the short-term, may lead to positive outcomes in the long-term (Exline & Bright, 2011).

Thus, it seems that findings regarding the impact of faith on human functioning are often complex. The bottom line is that faith has the potential to pose either benefits or risks, depending on individual, relational, and contextual factors. Generally speaking, faith has been linked to positive well-being, virtuous behavior, healthier and more satisfying relational interactions, and positive educational and workplace outcomes. Nevertheless, individuals, clinicians, and researchers must remain cognizant of the potential for negative impact. The fact that the relationships between faith and optimal human functioning are often complex, underscores the importance of not only examining the impact of faith in order to understand how faith is related to outcomes, but also why it is related.

### **7.3 Moderators and Mechanisms of Faith Links to Optimal Functioning**

Throughout the preceding chapters we have frequently noted various moderators and proposed mechanisms that attempt to account for the links between faith and various forms of human flourishing and optimal functioning. Several commonalities exist across some of the areas discussed in this book including behavior, emotions, cognitions, and relationships. Although much additional research is needed in this area, we highlight several potential moderators of the relationship between faith and variables of human flourishing. In addition, we identify several potential mechanisms across research topics linking faith to positive outcome measures, including meaning making, self-control and self-regulation, and positive emotions.

#### **7.3.1 Faith Moderators**

In response to the link between faith and a variety of areas of human functioning, researchers have begun to examine potential moderators of this relationship.

There is some evidence that the relationship between faith and outcomes differs across age groups, races, and genders. For example, in research examining links between faith and well-being, there seems to be a clear indication that the strongest links are present at older ages (Levin, 1997; Prati, & Pietrantonio, 2009; Wong, Rew, & Slaikeu, 2006; and Yonker et al., 2012). In addition, effect sizes for the relationship between faith and well-being also seem to be larger for African-American individuals than for Caucasian individuals (Hackney & Sanders, 2003). Perhaps the effects of religion are felt more strongly among groups for whom religion is more salient, as previous research has indicated that religion is more common among ethnic minorities (e.g., Douglas, Jimenez, Lin, & Frisman, 2008). Similarly, gender seems to moderate the relationship between religious behaviors and positive emotional outcomes, with religious coping being associated with posttraumatic growth to a greater extent for women than for men (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009). However, this gender difference has not been replicated among adolescents, among whom more research is needed to establish whether gender moderates the relationship between faith and positive psychology outcomes (Wong et al., 2006).

In conclusion, there appear to be several important variables that serve as moderators of the link between faith and optimal human functioning including gender, race, and age. Therefore, the links between faith and optimal human functioning seems to be stronger for some groups than others. Additional research is needed to further examine the variables of gender, race, and age to gain further understanding into how and why faith impacts flourishing for certain groups more than others. In addition, other demographic variables should be examined, such as socioeconomic background, to determine their potential influence. The trend seems to be that faith offers benefits to those who are socially oppressed or disadvantaged more so than others (Pargament, 1997). Thus, these moderation analyses may be revealing that faith acts as a buffer against the stressors associated with being in less privileged positions.

### **7.3.2 Faith Mechanisms**

Three potential mechanisms that have most frequently been discussed in the research literature in an effort to explain why faith promotes optimal human functioning and flourishing, include self-regulation and self-control, meaning-making, and positive emotion. Some have argued that faith operates at the level of the individual, for example, to develop the virtue of temperance, or self-control. Faith can offer individuals a sense of perceived control over their circumstances and there is research suggesting that self-control and self-regulation can lead to positive physical, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). When one's sense of personal control is threatened, being aligned with a Higher Power can bolster one's sense of control by creating the perception that one has a share in the Higher Power's control. Many of the world religions emphasize self-control as a virtue including Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism

(Pearce & Wachholtz, 2012). Some researchers have suggested that faith has an impact on various behaviors, such as drug/alcohol use, delinquency, and criminal behavior because faith promotes self-control and self-regulation (Murray, Goffin, & Malcarne, 2006; McCullough & Carter, 2013; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009; Walker, Ainett, Wills, & Mendoza, 2007). McCullough and Carter, for example, reviewed the empirical literature on how religion and spirituality relate to self-control and self-regulation and concluded that religion does indeed promote self-control and self-regulations through a variety of mechanisms including influencing how goals are set and pursued, facilitating self-monitoring, helping the development of self-regulatory strengths, and prescribing and fostering self-regulatory behaviors. Faith beliefs and practices, as a result, may promote various character traits that enhance self-regulation and impulse control and thereby reduce antisocial and behavioral excesses in addition to promoting prosocial activities.

Some empirical support for the proposition that faith impacts various behaviors via self-control is available. Walker and colleagues (2007) found that as self-rated importance of religion increased, the use of addictive substances such as alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes decreased and this relationship was mediated by self-control. In a recent nationally representative sample, Desmond and colleagues (Desmond, Ulmer, & Bader, 2013) also found that self-control partially mediated the inverse relationship between faith and both alcohol and marijuana use. In a recent experimental study, Laurin, Kay, and Fitzsimons (2012) used a procedure that utilized activating thoughts of God to examine its effects on self-regulation. Their findings suggested that participants who were reminded of God, compared to neutral or positive concepts, demonstrated both decreased active goal pursuit and increased temptation resistance. Their findings suggested that exposure to God influenced goal pursuit that both enhanced and hindered self-regulation.

A characteristic of faith that relates particularly strongly to well-being is that it is involved in meaning making. Park, Edmondson, and Hale-Smith (2013), for example, noted that faith is a functional way to satisfy the need for meaning for many people in virtually every culture. Faith offers individuals a mental schema from which to interpret life events and experiences, thereby providing the cognitive mechanisms for organizing a coherent sense of meaning (e.g., James & Wells, 2003). In fact, Park et al., noted that faith seems to be uniquely capable of meeting the demands of meaning that arise from life's deepest questions and that individuals find it helpful if not essential for a clear sense of the world and oneself. Thus, deriving a sense of meaning from faith is one mechanism by which faith is associated with human flourishing, such as experiencing high levels of emotional well-being, sense of purpose in one's work, and sense of belonging within one's community. In addition, the meaning offered by faith is also associated with positive behavioral outcomes. For example, faith might serve to decrease substance use by providing a source of meaning and life purpose and therefore reduce motivations to use alcohol as a coping mechanism (Dreup, Johnson, & Bindle, 2011; Johnson, Sheets, & Kristeller, 2008).



Yet others have suggested that faith may exert effects on optimal human functioning, at least in part, through the promotion of positive affect (Fredrickson, 2002; Oman & Thoresen, 2002; Park, 2007). Faith and spiritual experiences have been linked to a variety of positive emotions such as hope, gratitude, and well-being, among others (see Chap. 2 for a review). According to the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, such emotions are significant because they both broaden individuals' momentary thought-action repertoire and build their enduring personal resources (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). As a result, positive emotions can enhance individuals' personal resources offering physical, social, intellectual, and psychological strengths (Fredrickson, 1998), and can thereby impact a variety of behaviors. For example, emotions may contribute to the positive link between faith and prosocial behaviors (Saroglou, 2013). In addition, studies specifically in the area of health and health behaviors are beginning to appear that demonstrate how affect serves as a mediator of the link between faith and health-related behaviors. More research is needed to examine both positive and negative emotions related to different faith variables and their mediational role in a variety of other behaviors.

Faith may also relate to positive emotions because it offers skills that benefit the individual, such as the ability to self-regulate emotions and actions in harmony with both inner needs and environmental demands (Koole, McCullough, Kuhl, & Roelofsma, 2010). Faith can foster the ability to adjust one's behavior in pursuit of desired goals and to override unhelpful behavioral tendencies, emotions, and behaviors that can impede reaching one's goals (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Much of this happens in an implicit, automatic fashion as faith influences people's motivations and goals, reduces conflict among pursuits, and offers opportunities for self-monitoring and self-regulation. This may take place, in part, by reducing self-focused attention and anxiety, thereby freeing individuals to experience enhanced mental control (James & Wells, 2003). As such, faith may cultivate and activate cognitive mechanisms, emotional states, skills, motivation, and other psychological factors that increase positive emotions such as hope, optimism, gratitude, and well-being in people's lives.

Identifying the various mechanisms through which faith affects behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and relational outcomes does not negate the importance of faith, rather, it provides insight into the positive characteristics that faith offers for human thriving. Understanding these positive characteristics offered by faith is important because it has considerable practical value. Identifying the specific mechanisms of faith that promote optimal human functioning in the form of emotional well-being, forgiveness, empathy, altruism, honesty, ethics, health-promoting behaviors, positive cognitions, healthy relationships, as well as beneficial educational and workplace outcomes can lead to greater understanding about how to enhance and facilitate the development of these psychological outcomes. Such understanding can then be translated into various interventions and practices that might benefit people of faith as well as those who proclaim no faith beliefs.



## 7.4 Clinical Implications of Faith

The research reviewed in this volume offers numerous clinical implications. First, the research indicates that mental health professionals may benefit their clients by finding ways to support the development of faith to enhance individual, social, and community well-being. In line with the tenets of positive psychology, forms of therapy that focus specifically on positive emotions, behaviors, cognitions, and relationships have demonstrated great value (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). For example, positive psychology interventions such as focusing on the positives in one's daily life, expressing gratitude, and focusing on implementing one's strengths have resulted in increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms over time (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The research reviewed in this volume suggests that faith is an additional avenue for increasing individual positive psychological outcomes in addition to increasing positive interpersonal outcomes.

Research conducted thus far on incorporating faith into therapy has demonstrated that spiritually-based treatments can improve psychological well-being and seem to be particularly effective at increasing emotional well-being (e.g., Smith, Bartz, & Richards, 2007). While further clinical outcome research on the effects of spiritual interventions is needed, the current literature base suggests that it may be useful for clinicians to incorporate an emphasis on faith within psychotherapy and encourage their clients to begin or renew spiritual practices.

In addition, understanding the faith-based cognitive appraisals that clients make can facilitate psychotherapists' understanding of what motivates clients' deepest emotions and behaviors. For instance, positive spiritual appraisals are associated with investing more of one's time and resources in aspects of life, and experiencing strong, meaningful emotions and greater life satisfaction. Furthermore, the role of faith in the process of meaning making in response to trauma and loss should be of particular interest to counselors and psychotherapists who work with individuals in crisis.

Relationships are another clinical focus that may particularly benefit from an emphasis on faith. Clinicians should be aware that faith is an important dimension of relationships for many individuals. The research clearly indicates that faith can impact relationship communication and interactions in positive ways. For example, drawing on research of theistic mediation, it could be helpful for people to include God or a Higher Power into their relationships. In the case of relationship difficulties, this could help to stabilize the relationship by providing reference to an all-powerful God who has the relationship and both relationship partners' best interest at heart.

Individuals may benefit in their relationships from faith beliefs, particularly those that pertain to relationships, such as sanctification of marriage or parenting. For clients who participate in family or couples counseling, clinicians may wish to assess spiritual dimensions and spiritual interpretations of relationships, as these faith variables can have far reaching implications for the well-being of relationships.

Therefore, faith should not be overlooked as a potential resource for couples, parents, and families. In addition, it seems that relationships benefit most when those involved share the same faith perspectives and engage in faith interactions with one another, such as talking about spirituality and taking part in shared religious activities. Thus, it may be fruitful for clinicians to explore faith similarities and differences between individuals within a relationship and how they incorporate faith activities into their relationship.

One particular way that faith seems to promote positive relationships is through forgiveness. Therefore, it would be helpful for forgiveness interventions to incorporate faith elements (Lampton, Oliver, Worthington, & Berry, 2005; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Rye et al., 2005; Stratton et al., 2008). Of note, however, is the fact that some forgiveness interventions that included faith elements have been compared to forgiveness interventions without faith elements, with no distinguishable benefits (Rye, Wade, Fleri, Kidwell, 2013). But this should be understood in light of participants in both faith inclusive and non-faith inclusive interventions tend to report using faith-based strategies in their attempts to forgive, thereby making the search for differences less reliable (Rye & Pargament, 2002; Rye et al., 2005). In addition, a recent experimental treatment study examined the potential benefits of prayer in enhancing forgiveness and demonstrated that prayer increased state forgiveness as well as empathy toward one's offender (Vasiliauskas & McMinn, 2013). These findings suggest the important impact of faith in these interventions, regardless of whether the interventions themselves are explicitly faith-based or not. Future research should examine the impact of various forgiveness enhancing strategies as well as individual participants' personal faith beliefs and commitments on forgiveness.

Beyond efforts to aid those seeking therapy, the research reviewed in this volume also points to the potential of faith within the general population to both promote various prosocial and health-promoting behaviors and to protect against unethical behavior and several health-risk behaviors. For example, research suggests the potential for using faith in order to cultivate both empathy and altruism in individuals. It may be possible to enhance altruistic behaviors by introducing people to certain faith activities, such as meditation, that facilitate the experience of self-transcendence and nurture the development of less literal ways of thinking about spirituality or religious concepts (Huber & MacDonald, 2012). Research into the development and evaluation of empathy and altruism promoting interventions is in its infancy and therefore future research is needed to determine the effectiveness of various interventions, which components of these interventions are effective, and how these interventions might be effective across diverse populations (Shapiro & Sahgal, 2012).

As noted previously, empirical research has demonstrated that faith is related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and burnout, which suggests the potential of faith-related interventions to enhance positive outcomes and prevent negative outcomes in the workplace. For example, businesses and organizations might benefit from improved understanding of employees' faith beliefs and practices and how to incorporate this understanding into various workplace policies.

In addition, various interventions and initiatives might be introduced to enhance employee's sense of calling, which could impact employee productivity, organizational commitment, and job retention. Other workplace interventions might incorporate specific spiritual practices to help reduce burnout and enhance employees' ability to cope with various job stresses.

In conclusion, there is promising potential for faith-based interventions and program initiatives to impact optimal human functioning at the individual, relational, and community levels, but much more research and program development are needed. In addition, there are several specific practice and research issues related to various interventions that deserve attention. The therapeutic approaches and faith-based initiatives discussed in this section, for example, will be meaningful only if they fit within a person's individualized understanding and experience of the sacred. Taking faith out of context in an effort to achieve ulterior benefits will likely result in faith losing its essence and thereby the associated outcomes reviewed in this volume. In addition, this volume discusses a broad range of faith variables, including those that may be relevant to individuals who do not identify with a particular religious tradition. Clinicians and those who implement faith-based initiatives should be sensitive to religious diversity and the fit of particular religious interventions for a given individual. For example, loving-kindness meditation may benefit individuals who are not comfortable with traditional prayer or vice versa. In addition, because many interventions that have incorporated a faith component have only included content from mainstream Protestant Christian perspectives, future intervention development and evaluation research should examine other Christian and non-Christian perspectives (e.g., Rye et al., 2013). Finally, while many clinicians believe that spiritual interventions could help their clients, few have training in how to do so (Larimore, Parker, & Crowther, 2002). Fortunately, professional associations and educational institutions are beginning to provide information on how to incorporate spirituality into clinical practice (Larimore et al., 2002), although broader efforts are necessary to provide greater opportunities for clinical training and education on faith-based clinical practice and programmatic initiatives.

## 7.5 Research Limitations and Future Directions

As noted in every chapter in this volume, the research literature relating faith to optimal human functioning includes numerous methodological strengths, but also several weaknesses. The strengths include the substantial amount of research that has been conducted, including replication of research findings. In addition, many studies have controlled a host of demographic and potentially confounding variables, resulting in greater confidence that faith relates directly to positive outcome measures. Furthermore, a fair amount of studies have employed large samples, at times with national datasets. Finally, over the years, measures of faith have become more complex, and there has been a move toward more longitudinal

research. Nevertheless, there are also numerous methodological weaknesses that we summarize in order to advance the field of research on how faith relates to optimal human functioning and flourishing.

While it is a strength of this area of research that a variety of diverse aspects of faith have been examined in relation to positive outcome measures, this also complicates attempts to draw clear conclusions about the relationship between faith and outcomes. This is perhaps the greatest challenge to summarizing research in this field, with operational definitions of faith ranging from a belief in God, to church attendance, to frequency of prayer, to self-reported religiosity. Yet other studies have operationally defined faith in terms of religious orientations, such as intrinsic, quest, and orthodoxy or fundamentalism. Some discrepancies in research findings are no doubt related to the manner in which faith has been operationalized. More research is needed to understand the substantive components of faith (e.g., beliefs, practices, experiences) that contribute to well-being most directly, and the specific ways in which they do so. Although a variety of faith measures have been used, the relative effects have only infrequently been tested against one another (e.g., Mayrl & Oeur, 2009). Some exceptions are in the research literature on spiritual appraisals and religious coping, both of which have been shown to predict outcomes above and beyond common religious factors, such as salience of religion and spirituality and frequency of church attendance and prayer. Another exception is a study conducted by Saroglou et al. (2005), which found different altruism outcomes depending upon whether religiousness was isolated from spirituality. For example, these researchers found a difference in the type of target for altruism when faith definitions were considered. In this study, when religiousness was isolated from spirituality, people high on religiousness engaged in helping behaviors toward loved ones but not strangers, whereas those high on spirituality showed helping behaviors toward both loved ones and strangers.

Moving forward, greater attention should be given to how faith and spirituality are defined and, in particular, various dimensions of these constructs need to be teased out and evaluated. Researchers have called for theoretical models that recognize the multidimensional nature of faith, because faith can only be understood descriptively through its cognitive, affective, experiential, and behavioral expressions (MacDonald, 2000). Indeed, faith is a multifaceted variable and the question of which facet most clearly represents the essential nature of faith, has only rarely been addressed by researchers (Hackney & Sanders, 2003). In addition, future research should recognize that faith can also be measured as a relational variable. The research reviewed in this volume makes it clear that faith is not only an individual phenomenon, but can also be interpersonal in nature, manifesting in various forms of personal relationships. Because faith is multidimensional, individual, and relational in nature, future research should examine them as such, in addition to examining the relative effects of various faith and spirituality dimensions on psychological outcomes.

In addition to definitional challenges, the research on faith and optimal human functioning is characterized by several other methodological weaknesses. Much of the research conducted to date, for example, is atheoretical, which limits its

contribution to the specific area examining faith and positive outcomes as well as to the field of psychology more generally. In one recent review of 43 studies, for example, researchers found that over half of the studies reviewed were atheoretical or had no clear framework (Rew & Wong, 2006). More recent research has begun to examine the relationship between faith and optimal human functioning using more sophisticated methods that can take into account both theory and the complicated relationships that exist between faith and psychological outcomes. One example is the research on faith and forgiveness that tests the models proposed by Worthington and colleagues, which are beginning to receive considerable empirical support (Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, Gartner, & Worthington, 2012; Davis, Hook, & Worthington, 2008; Worthington et al., 2012). Greater attention to theory development is needed to guide future research.

In addition, the majority of research on faith and positive psychological outcomes has focused on U.S. populations and on Western religious traditions. Although such research offers confidence that the findings are likely representative of the U.S. population, it is less clear how the link between faith and optimal human functioning would apply to those in other countries or from other religious traditions. Thus, there is a need for greater diversity among research participants. Specifically, some of the research uses small, nonsystematic, or non-diverse samples, which might obscure the potential mechanisms through which faith might have influence. Many studies, for example, have been conducted with college students or special populations or have confounded age with outcome measures. With regard to the research on faith and honesty, for example, many studies that fail to find any impact of faith on behavioral outcomes have relied on samples of children, high school students, or college students. As another example, the research on altruism largely relies on college student samples. Many have argued that the relationship between faith and these behavioral variables might change as a function of age and developmental status and studies that examine these links should consider the age and developmental stage of the individual (e.g., Koenig, 2006; Midlarsky et al., 2012). In addition, here is some indication that the relationship between faith and well-being, for example, differs across Christian traditions (Tix, Dik, Johnson, & Steger, 2013), but much more insight is needed into how this relationship functions across Christian traditions and other world religions. In some cases, it would also be beneficial to assess more clinical populations regarding how faith relates to positive psychological outcomes, in order to make clearer recommendations for those with mental health concerns.

In addition, there is a need for more sophisticated research designs and statistical analyses to control for potential extraneous variables. While some studies have controlled for a host of potentially confounding variables, many others have not. Studies in general, for example, do not provide controls for participation in nonreligious activities, leaving open the possibility that positive outcomes are the result of social support or other factors, rather than specifically the contribution of faith *per se*. The research examining the link between faith and delinquency and crime, for example, has been criticized for having too few studies that address the potential of peer effects that are potentially influential (Cornwall, 1989; Ozorak, 1989).

Next steps in research methodology should also include moving beyond self-report measures to multiple methods of assessment, including behavioral measures, observer reports, and physiological measure. Furthermore, although longitudinal designs have been able to display how changes take place over time in some areas of research, such designs have not been employed in other areas. Longitudinal designs would be helpful to not only examine change over time and the potential role of faith in eliciting optimal human functioning, but in examining the potential developmental implications of faith. In addition, as helpful as longitudinal designs are for teasing out order effects, they are not able to speak to causality. Therefore, the field should strive to employ experimental designs, such as controlled clinical trials focusing on the benefits of various faith practices.

In addition to general methodological weaknesses that should be addressed in future research there are also specific substantive criticisms of current research that should direct future efforts. Research is needed, for example, to examine the specific features of faith-based processes and outcomes such as examining both similarities and differences in religious and nonreligious sources of influence on well-being (e.g., Maton & Wells, 1995). One question that has not yet been sufficiently addressed in the research literature on community, for example, is whether faith-based communities/organizations offer anything distinct from other types of communities. Some evidence is available about the unique contributions of faith in other areas of research with regard to religious motivations and values, religious coping, and spiritual struggles and distress (Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani, 1998; Magyar, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney et al., 1999; Pargament et al., 1999), but more research is needed that focuses on the community and relational levels.

There have been few explanations offered for why faith might exert a beneficial effect on some outcomes but not others. As we have seen, there are several areas of research on faith and various psychological outcomes that demonstrate that faith typically is associated with positive outcomes. Although less common, there is also evidence that faith can be associated with negative outcomes such as those related to negative emotions and declines in well-being, unhelpful cognitions, child functioning, and interactions in the workplace. Research is needed to examine whether faith influences various outcomes through particular pathways. Researchers need to ask not only whether faith impacts psychological outcomes for good, but if so, how and why. Many of the outcome variables discussed in this volume - emotions, behaviors, cognitions, and relationships, in addition to being associated with faith, are also associated with various other mental and physical health outcome variables that are also linked to faith. More research is needed on these links. It may be that emotions, behaviors, and cognitions serve as mediators between faith and mental and physical health outcomes. Worthington et al. (2012), for example, have suggested that the relationship between faith and various health outcomes may be mediated by an individual's ability to forgive. As another example, more studies are needed to explore the specific mechanisms by which faith benefits relationships to better understand the reasons why faith is associated with better quality relationships and greater relationship satisfaction. Religious beliefs, values, and practices,

for example, may provide spiritual resources that promote positive relationship interactions, such as empathy and the experience of relationship support from a Higher Power or religious community. More insight is needed into how these aspects of faith potentially function to improve relationships in daily life.

In addition, our review of the research literature highlights the importance of examining contextual factors when studying the connection between faith and psychological outcomes. In many cases, faith relates to various outcome variables only under certain circumstances or depending on various conditions, as in the research reviewed on forgiveness and helping behavior demonstrates. Many people of faith, for example, help under circumstances in which the target of the helping behavior is familiar. This may be due to the fact that people of faith value interpersonal relationships, social approval, and in-group versus out-group affiliation (Saroglou, 2013). Second, people of certain religious orientations, such as orthodoxy and fundamentalism, are particularly less likely to engage in helping behavior when the targets are unfamiliar or hold values that are inconsistent with their own. This may be due to the fact that religious people are less likely to help when the person in need exhibits behavior that violates a religious standard (Jackson & Esses, 1997; Thurston, 2000). Researchers must examine not only whether faith is related to various outcome variables, but also how and why they are related.

Additional research is also needed to further knowledge and understanding of potentially impactful intervention and prevention strategies. Information about the efficacy of many of the intervention programs discussed in this volume is lacking. For example, although the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program has existed for decades, very little information is known about the efficacy of the therapeutic and spiritual aspects of the program (Koenig et al., 2012). While empirical research is leading in the direction of establishing spiritually-based treatments as efficacious for improving psychological well-being, further controlled clinical trials that consider diverse populations are needed to establish the effects of these spiritual interventions. From a positive psychology perspective, empirical research on the connection between faith and psychological outcomes should have as its ultimate purpose the enhancement of optimal human functioning which can be nurtured through intervention strategies that are evidence-based.

Finally, there is a need to expand research efforts to other topics. Some areas of investigation have been virtually neglected. For example, more research is needed to examine when and how emotions take on a religious or spiritual nature and what the implications are for emotions and well-being. To date, little is known about whether spiritual emotions offer distinct benefits from general emotions. In terms of how faith is related to cognition, there is a dearth of research examining the influence of language as a component of cognition, the role of faith on cognitive functioning, and the impact of faith on unconscious forms of cognition. More empirical research is also needed to establish how faith impacts a greater variety of types of relationships to mirror the findings that have been established with regard to marital and family relationships. Thus, there are many opportunities to expand current knowledge of the role of faith in relatively unexplored areas such as



the quality of relationships between friends, co-workers, or neighbors. In addition, more research is needed to examine the role of faith for communities as a whole. Most research on faith in community settings focuses on the individual within such organizations. For example, research on faith in the workplace examines the impact of faith at the individual level of employees. More research is needed to examine how faith impacts employers and leaders and their role at the organizational level. Furthermore, there are a number of additional community organizations and institutions that should be studied in which faith may lead to positive outcomes such as correctional settings, military settings, and governmental agencies.

The subfields of psychology of religion/spirituality and positive psychology are both young as distinct disciplines. Making use of the tools of the psychology of religion/spirituality to promote the goals of positive psychology is a recent, yet exciting endeavor. Because the study of religion represents an intersection of many interests, examining its social implications necessarily requires a willingness to consider divergent theoretical and even disciplinary perspectives (Donahue & Nielsen, 2005). Theory development in research on faith and optimal human functioning, for example, would benefit from the recognition that this area of study is a multidisciplinary undertaking that should draw from the expertise of many disciplines including psychology, medicine, sociology, and anthropology among others. Drawing on the strengths of the methodologies and theories in each of these disciplines will allow great strides to be made for understanding how faith can impact individuals, relationships, communities, and society in powerful ways.

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