

The Sacred Character of Community Life

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Abstract Theory and research suggest that there is a basic and irreducible human yearning for a relationship with something that transcends ourselves, something sacred. The sacred can be understood not only in individual terms, but also in terms of relationships, settings, and communities. Empirical studies indicate that the sacred has powerful implications for human behavior; it can be an organizing force and a resource to people in their most difficult times, yet it can also be a source of seemingly intractable problems. This paper reviews several of the promising steps psychologists have taken to learn about the sacred, learn from spiritual communities, and collaborate with these communities in efforts to better the world. Research and practice in this area is enriching our understanding of the meaning of community and the meaning of spirituality.

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Introduction

Have you every tried to re-create the recipe for a favorite dish? Yalom (1980) tells the story of his attempt to do so

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while taking a cooking class. Even though he followed the chef's instructions for preparing the dish down to the last painstaking detail, he was unable to match that special taste. No matter how many times he tried, there was always something missing. Thoroughly frustrated, Yalom decided to observe each and every step the chef took in preparing the dish. But watching the chef only left Yalom more confused. He had followed every step identically. Then Yalom happened to notice something. When the chef had finished with the dish, she handed it off to her assistant, who in the time it took to walk the dish from the counter to the oven, managed to throw in an assortment of spices and condiments. It was these hidden ingredients that made the difference. In our efforts to understand what makes a community, I believe that we have also overlooked at least one critical but hidden ingredient—the sacred (Hill 2000).

Why this is the case would make a paper in itself. Perhaps we as psychologists have overlooked this ingredient because we are considerably less religious than the general population in the United States and, as a result, tend to underestimate the power of religion and spirituality in the lives of others, assuming that it is merely a vestige of the past that is sure to go away as we continue to progress toward a more secular society (Shafranske 2001). Perhaps we steer clear of religious and spiritual matters because of the differences in the ways many people within scientific and religious communities view the world and attempt to understand it (Kloos and Moore 2000). Or perhaps we have neglected this ingredient because we simply don't know how to find it, how to measure it, and how to add it to our favorite recipes.

Whatever its cause, this oversight is unfortunate because spirituality is a vital part of peoples' lives—their dreams, their deepest values, the stories they live by. And it is a vital part of peoples' lives not only individually but

collectively. In this paper, I want to encourage psychologists to make the sacred character of community life more explicit. Why? For three reasons. First, sacred matters matter. I will stress that spirituality is an important predictor of behavior, an importance resource to many people, and at times a source of problems in and of itself. Second, because the sacred matters, we can extend our own understanding as psychologists by learning more about spirituality. Finally, by learning more about spirituality, we will be in a better position to better the world. Conversely, if we neglect this critical ingredient, our own efforts to understand and better the world will be incomplete. Like Yalom, we are likely to find that there is something missing from our own recipes.

A number of community psychologists have made some promising starts in this area, but we still have a ways to go. We are not at the tipping point yet. This paper is an effort to nudge the field one step closer to a more explicit approach to spirituality in community life. As a prelude to my remarks, it is important for me to be explicit about my own underlying assumptions and my own definition of spirituality and the sacred.

Assumptions and Definitions

People are Spiritual Beings

I assume that people are not only social, psychological, and physical beings, they are also spiritual beings. Children, at even an early age, show evidence of an inclination to seek out something sacred. Reminiscing on her childhood, one woman said: “I used to talk to angels all of the time. I began hearing them when I was about three years old. They told me how flowers grew and about all the things that went on in the garden and about relationships (Anderson and Hopkins 1991, p. 28). Another child began writing to God at an early age: “Dear God,” he wrote, “How is it in heaven? How is it being the Big Cheese” (Heller 1986, p. 31).

Recent research in cognitive-developmental psychology also suggests that children come into this world with propensities for spiritual experience and knowledge, including the capacity to think about God as unique rather than humanlike, the ability to conceive of immaterial spirit and an afterlife, and a propensity to experience emotions of awe and compassion. “From early on,” Johnson and Boyatzis (2006) conclude, “human beings are naturally spiritual, as we are oriented toward expanding our sense of meaning and value in connecting ourselves to a wider reality, beyond the perceptually given” (p. 220).

Not everyone agrees. Social scientists have generally viewed spiritual experiences and thoughts as expressions of

presumably more basic motivations. Freud (1927/1961), for example, believed that religiousness was at root a defense mechanism designed to allay deep-seated anxieties and satisfy child-like wishes. Durkheim (1915) saw religion as simply an expression of basic needs for belonging and social unification. Leuba (1933) argued that religion was merely a manifestation of physiological processes. Each of these theorists explained religious phenomena within their larger psychological or sociological frameworks, and none saw the need for special attention to spirituality.

Reductionistic approaches to religion and spirituality are still very much alive and well today. A few years ago, an immunologist took me aside following a conference on religion and health, and said: “All of this talk about religion and spirituality is fine, but isn’t religion just a bunch of hormones?” I want to emphasize that attempts to understand religious and spiritual life at other levels of analysis—psychological, social, and physiological—have an important place in the social sciences. Even so, there is an important difference between explaining spirituality and explaining it away (Pargament 2002). In this paper, I would like to ask that we put aside our tendency to reduce religion and spirituality to something that’s presumably more basic and more real, and instead consider spirituality as a process that might be significant in and of itself. I hope to convince you that there is value in treating spirituality as a distinctive and meaningful dimension of life in its own right.

My assumption then is that people are spiritual beings, motivated to discover, hold on to, and, at times, transform a relationship with the sacred. Spirituality is, as I define it, a search for the sacred (Pargament 1999); it is a natural and normal part of life. I’ve been bandying about the term “sacred” for a while now and it is central to my definition of spirituality, so let me elaborate on that here.

Defining the Sacred

The sacred refers not only to concepts of God, the divine, and transcendent reality, but also to any aspect of life that takes on extraordinary character by virtue of its association with, or representation of, divinity (Pargament and Mahoney 2005). One way to envision the sacred is as a core and a ring. At the core of the sacred lie perceptions of God, divinity, and transcendent reality. However, the sacred can extend beyond this core to include a surrounding ring of objects that are perceived as sacred themselves by virtue of their association with the sacred core. Mahoney and I have described two ways that people “sanctify” or come to perceive the sacred in their lives: theistically and nontheistically.

Theistic Sanctification

People can perceive objects as manifestations of their beliefs, images, or experiences of God. Through religious education and ritual, the religions of the world teach their adherents to see God as manifest in many aspects of life. In religious services, Jews regularly recite the blessing: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! The whole earth is full of His glory’ (Donin 1980, p. 122). Within their sacred literature, Hindus are taught that the divine power of Brahman dwells in the visible and in the invisible: “Filled with Braham are the things we see. Filled with Brahman the things we see not, From out of Brahman floweth all that is: From Brahman all—yet he is still the same (Upanishads 1975, p. 80). The Christian sacraments also provide a point of connection between the sacred and the human. For instance, the ritual of baptism, re-enacts the blessing of Jesus in which the individual is recognized as a beloved “child of God” imbued with the Holy Spirit. Through this process of theistic sanctification, people can see God as manifest in many aspects of their lives. One of my graduate students, Shauna McCarthy, described the way she perceived God all around her:

God has a deep raspy voice – God is a jazz singer. She is a plush, warm and rosy – God is a grandmother. He has the patient rock of an old man in a porch rocker. He hums and laughs, he marvels at the sky. God coos babies – she is a new mother. He is the steady, gentle hand of a nurse, has the cool reassurance of a person pursuing his life’s work and a free spirit of a young man wandering only to live and love life.

Nontheistic Sanctification

People can also imbue aspects of life with qualities of the divine, even if they question or disbelieve in God or a higher power. What are these sacred qualities? They include the notion of transcendence—the perception that there is an extraordinary dimension to our lives, something that goes beyond our immediate selves, our everyday experience, and our usual understanding. Community psychologists may be particularly appreciative of this dimension, for we recognize the limits of self-contained individualism and look for something that goes beyond ourselves as isolated units (Sarason 1993).

Another sacred quality, boundlessness, involves the perception of endless time and space. Poet Blake (1977) captured this quality in one of his famous poems: “To see a World in a grain of Sand; And Heaven in a Wild Flower; Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand; And Eternity in an Hour” (p. 506).

Yet another sacred quality, ultimacy, refers to the perception of an essential and ultimate truth that underlies the foundation of experience. Ultimacy has to do with what we perceive as “really, real” (Geertz 1966).

As I mentioned, the notion of sanctification does not apply only to people who consider themselves traditionally religious or spiritual. Even those who don’t believe in a personal God can sanctify aspects of life. Einstein (1954), no less, recognized the transcendent impulse to pursue mystery and seek out deeper truths, and he imbued the scientific quest with these sacred qualities. He said:

The most beautiful experience that we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed... A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds: it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute true religiosity. In this sense, and only in this sense, I am a deeply religious man (p. 11).

Similarly, in his last written words, noted atheist Gould (2002) spoke in the language of the sacred: “Something almost unspeakably holy—I don’t know how else to say this – underlies our discovery and confirmation of the actual details that made our world and also, in realms of contingency, assured the minutiae of its construction in the manner we know, and not in any one of a trillion other ways, nearly all of which would not have included the evolution of a scribe to record the beauty, fascination, and the mystery” (p. 1343). It could be argued that these words are merely rhetoric, but perhaps they point to the yearning for a deeper meaning to the structure of our existence.

Because the sacred dimension can be more an implicit than explicit part of the lives of people, particularly scientists, we may be surprised when we find ourselves sensing this deeper dimension. In a courageous and revealing paper, Sarason (1993) described himself as Jewish but agnostic with little involvement in traditional Jewish practice or community involvement. Yet during the first week of the 1967 war in Israel, when there was a real threat that Israel would be destroyed, Sarason had an unanticipated reaction:

Almost instantly I realized that whatever my sense of personal identity had been, it silently depended on the belief that Israel would endure beyond my lifetime. In ways that I had never bothered to face, in ways that I do not fully comprehend today, I was part of something that was physically external to me and yet in my

psychological bloodstream. I could no longer maintain the fiction that I was a discrete individual whose life had meaning only in terms of ideas, work, family, or other interpersonal affiliations. There was more to me than the old me I thought I knew. And that more was the history of my people and the need, the wish that unlike me Israel would transcend my existence, that is, it had an endless future (p. 197).

The point here is that, in spite of the arguments that we have entered a secular age in the United States, many people (even scientists) perceive the world through a sacred lens. In a national survey, Doehring et al. (in press) found that three quarters of the sample “see God’s presence in all of life”; 90% perceived that there are qualities in life such as love and hope, that are everlasting; and 76% “experience something more sacred in life than simply material existence.” So there is nothing strange or unusual about perceptions of sacredness in life.

The Varieties of the Sacred

Through the power of sanctification, we extend the domain of spiritual study from a focus on heavenly concerns to a focus on concerns that are very much down-to-earth, for virtually any aspect of life can become sacred through association with the divine or by imbuing it with the qualities of transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy. Consider just a few examples.

Cultural products such as music, literature, or sports can be perceived as sacred. One Brazilian pastor commented on the fervor for soccer: “We have so much misery and suffering here. So much difficulties and pain. But soccer is our gift from God. Our healing grace so that we Brazilians can go on.”

Work can be viewed as sacred. Some of you may see your involvement in community psychology as simply a nine to five job, but my guess is that for most of you, our field is more than a job, it’s a vocation that taps into our deepest values, what we hold as our timeless truths, and our desire to contribute in lasting ways to something that goes well beyond ourselves.

Time can be understood as sacred, with some moments set apart from others as holy. “What is the Sabbath,” theologian Heschel (1973) asks? “The presence of eternity, a moment of majesty, the radiance of joy. The Sabbath is an assurance that the spirit is greater than the universe, that beyond the good is the holy. The Sabbath is holiness in time” (p. 417).

And we can sanctify many personal qualities, including virtues and the soul. Listen, for example, to the sanctification of these qualities reflected in the words of Kushner (1989): “Where is God,” he asks. “God is found in the

incredible resiliency of the human soul, in our willingness to love though we understand how vulnerable love makes us, in our determination to go on affirming the value of life even when events in the world would seem to teach us that life is cheap” (p. 178).

One sacred object, however, has been relatively neglected—community. This is likely no accident. Just as people have become increasingly disengaged from other institutions, they have moved increasingly away from involvement in formal religious institutions. The term, spirituality itself, has become polarized and disconnected from its social and institutional context (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). Today, the phrase “I’m spiritual, but not religious” has become almost a mantra. For many people, spirituality refers to an intensely intraindividual experience, something that takes place in solitude, exclusively within oneself, within the privacy of one’s own home or outdoors.

What this overlooks is the fact that spirituality is always shaped by a larger context, even if it’s a context people dislike and reject. Just as we cannot escape the families we grew up in, we cannot escape the fact that we remain a part of a larger religious environment. We may reject it, but we still are shaped and defined by what we have rejected.

The individualization of spirituality also overlooks the sacred character of community life. Theologian and philosopher, Buber (1970) maintained that spirituality is essentially relational. He said: “Man lives in the spirit when he is able to respond to his Thou. He is able to do that when he enters this relation with his whole being. It is solely by virtue of his power to relate that man is able to live in the spirit” (p. 87). Similarly, speaking the language of sanctification, Dokecki et al. (2001) define spirit as the energy of relationship that manifests itself in (1) communal experiences of being together and bonding with all aspects of experience; (2) reflection on ultimate concerns; and (3) service to others which enables them to pursue their own ultimate concerns.

Once we become alert to it, we can find many examples of sacredness in relationships, settings, and communities. Listen to the way one young woman finds the sacred in relationships: “The things that make me feel as if I could touch the face of God are times when I am overwhelmed by love and friendship. The last time I went to a family reunion, I was touched by the level of love and caring everyone showed me. There’s nothing like the feeling of being loved. I would say that love is the one thing in life that can truly take a person to another level in life, because the source behind love...is God” (Rosenberg 2002, p. 8).

Not surprisingly many people experience this sense of sacredness in religious institutions. But I want to stress that I am not talking only about religious communities here. We can find the sacred in unexpected places. In his coming of

age memoir, writer Moehringer (2006) describes how he came to view his local neighborhood tavern as a sanctuary from his chaotic family life. The language of the sacred runs throughout his portrait of Dickens, this Long Island bar. Moehringer writes:

Everyone has a holy place, a refuge, where their heart is purer, their mind clearer, where they feel closer to God or love or truth or whatever it is they happen to worship. For better or worse my holy place was [Dickens]. And because I found it in my youth, the bar was that much more sacred, its image clouded by that special reverence children accord those places where they feel safe. Others might feel this way about a classroom or playground, a theater or church, a laboratory or library or stadium. Even a home. But none of these places claimed me. We exalt what is at hand. Had I grown up beside a river or an ocean, some natural avenue of self-discovery and escape, I might have mythologized it. Instead I grew up 142 steps from a glorious old American tavern, and that has made all the difference (pp. 8–9).

Many people look at life in part or in toto through a sacred lens; this visual field includes not only people as individuals but their relationships, their institutions, and their communities. In this section, I have tried to make the point that this phenomenon simply reflects a basic and irreducible human yearning for a relationship with something that transcends ourselves, that extends beyond the limits of time and space, and that speaks to something that is ultimately true and real. Of course, you might ask why we should bother with these sacred matters. The fact that people often use the language of the sacred to describe their experiences could be seen as merely a rhetorical device. In the next section, I would like to suggest that sacred matters do, in fact, matter by reviewing empirical studies which reveal some of the important implications of spirituality for human functioning. I will focus in particular on studies which speak to the importance of the sacred dimension of community life.

Some Implications of Spirituality for Human Functioning

From the outset, I want to emphasize that empirical studies of the sacred, do not speak to the reality of the sacred. We have no tools to measure God, the reality of the sacred, or what is true or “really, real.” But we can study perceptions of the sacred and their implications for day-to-day life. As I think you’ll see these perceptions have power. Let me summarize six of the implications of spirituality for human functioning.

Perceptions of the Sacred are Tied to Spiritual Emotions

Think about the most moving emotional experiences of your lives. Perhaps they were triggered by the birth of a child, overlooking the chasm of the Grand Canyon, listening to a piece of beautiful music, a wedding ceremony, passing your doctoral dissertation defense—whatever the trigger, my guess is that many of you experienced powerful spiritual emotions in your response to these events.

Almost a hundred years ago, theologian Otto (1928) described the distinctive emotions that surround the encounter with the sacred. He coined the term “mysterium” to capture this complex of emotions made up of feelings of awe, fascination, gratitude, humility, and reverence, as well as feelings of fear and dread. Maslow (1968) described peak experiences in similar terms. He said: “the emotional reaction in the peak experience has a special flavor of wonder, of awe, of reverence, of humility and surrender before the experience as before something great” (pp. 87–88). More recently, psychologist of religion, Hood (2005) has shown that mystical experiences are quite common and they are accompanied by the feeling that the individual is in touch with something absolutely real, “a foundational reality” in the words of Hood. They are also marked by feelings of oneness and unity with the world or within oneself.

Empirical studies indicate that perceptions of sacredness are often tied to spiritual emotions, such as awe, gratitude, and connectedness to others (Haidt 2003; Emmons and McCullough 2003). For example, Haidt (2003) induced emotions of elevation and awe in a laboratory by showing participants video clips of the life of Mother Teresa. Other participants watched video clips from an emotionally neutral documentary and a comedy sketch. The participants were then asked to describe their physical feelings and motivations. Compared to participants in the other two conditions, elevated participants reported more warm, pleasant, or “tingling” feelings in their chests as well as greater desires to help others, to improve themselves, and to connect with other people.

As an aside, I have wondered whether positive spiritual emotions such as awe, uplift, and gratitude may help explain why people who attend church more regularly live on the average 7 years longer than their less frequent church attending counterparts (McCullough et al. 2000). The fact that this effect is even more dramatic for African-Americans may reflect the special ability of the African-American church to elicit these spiritual emotions through music, dance, and moving sermons. Of course, this interpretation also raises the possibility that bad church music and boring sermons may increase the risk of death.

People Organize their Lives Around the Sacred

James (1907/1975) once pointed out that “Our different purposes are... at war with each other” (p. 70). The discovery of the sacred, however, can offset some of these forces of fragmentation. As the source of powerful spiritual emotions, the sacred becomes a passion and a priority. People feel drawn to or grasped by the sacred. Once encountered and experienced, the sacred becomes the place to be, and people begin to invest more and more of themselves in sacred pursuits.

For example, in one study of a national sample of Presbyterians, we found that those who perceived the environment as sacred were more likely to invest money in environmental causes (Tarakeshwar et al. 2001). In another study of a random community sample led by Annette Mahoney, we asked people to list their 10 most important strivings in life and rate the degree to which they sanctified these strivings (Mahoney et al. 2005). We then conducted a series of phone calls over the next month and asked our sample to report on how much time, energy, and resources they devoted to each of their strivings over the prior 24 h. We found that people spent more time and energy on their more highly sanctified goals and strivings.

As people invest more of themselves in the sacred, the sacred can begin to integrate competing thoughts, actions, feelings, and aspirations into a unified life plan and identity. I like the way Kress and Elias (2000) put it: “Religious identity,” they said, “can be seen as functioning like a lighthouse, providing guidance for navigating uncertain territory, and a beacon with which to take one’s bearings when fixed points are lacking” (p. 189).

Emmons et al. conducted a study that pointed to the organizing power of the sacred (Emmons et al. 1998). They asked a group of community members to list their personal strivings (“the things that you typically or characteristically are trying to do in your everyday behavior”). The researchers then classified people in terms of the proportion of their spiritually oriented strivings. Emmons found that people who indicated a higher proportion of spiritual strivings also reported less conflict among their goals, greater purpose in life, and greater goal integration.

These findings are consistent with the sentiments of anthropologist Geertz (1966) who wrote that sacred symbols “function to synthesize a people’s ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their worldview—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order” (p. 3).

People are Motivated to Preserve and Protect What They Hold Sacred

Over the course of history, from the first Christian sects to the pilgrims who came to this country on the Mayflower, religious movements, imbued with transcendent meaning and value, have demonstrated extraordinary tenacity and resilience in the face of extreme hardship. This tenacity can be seen in individual stories as well. Berkovits (1979) described the lengths many Jews went to preserve their sacred identity in the Holocaust. One mother, interrupted by Gestapo agents in the midst of the ritual circumcision of her newborn son, shouted: “Hurry up! Circumcise the child. Don’t you see? They have come to kill us. At least let my child die as a Jew” (p. 45).

Empirical studies have also shown how individuals preserve and protect aspects of life they hold sacred. In a study of community sample of married couples, we found that husbands and wives who sanctified their marriages were more protective of their relationships; in response to conflict, they reported more collaborative problem solving, less verbal aggression toward each other, less marital conflict, and less stalemating (Mahoney et al. 1999). In another study, we found that college students who perceived their bodies to be sacred were more likely to engage in health-protective behaviors, including wearing a seat belt, getting enough sleep, and low levels of alcohol use and cigarette smoking (Mahoney et al. 2005).

Of course, people attempt to preserve and protect many aspects of life, not only those they hold sacred. But it seems that once goals and values are sanctified, they take on special power—people become more likely to persist in their efforts to enact their sacred values. A study by one of the true pioneers in the community psychology of religion, Ken Maton, is relevant here. Maton et al. compared the effectiveness of churches and other community organizations in providing academic and social mentoring of inner-city youth over a 7-year period to facilitate academic success (see Maton and Wells 1995). Each sponsoring organization agreed to recruit mentors for all students, provide them with after-school academic and cultural activities, and contribute \$10,000 in support of the students. In comparison to the secular organizations, students served by the churches were more likely to have a mentor, maintain a longer-term relationship with their mentors, and achieve more consistent academic gains. Maton suggested that church-based mentors may experience an especially deep and enduring commitment to their students because they perceive the program as a divine mission or calling from God. Speer et al. (1995) found similar results in favor of church-based organizing efforts over those of block clubs representing neighborhoods.

People Draw on the Sacred as a Resource to Support and Sustain Themselves

Once discovered, sacred objects become the most precious of all commodities, the assets people turn to for strength and solace in the most dire of times. In 1989, *Life Magazine* interviewed survivors of a plane crash that resulted in the deaths of over 100 passengers. An engine had exploded, the hydraulic system was destroyed, and the plane plunged toward the earth carrying passengers who believed they were about to die. On the brink of catastrophe, many passengers drew upon their sacred resources. One 44-year-old survivor described his harrowing experience this way:

The plane was moving more erratically. I knew it wasn't good by the increase in activity of the stewardesses... The guy next to me at minus four minutes said, 'We ain't going to make it'...I noticed the nun across from me had been praying on her rosary. I remembered I had a cross in my pocket. I pulled it out and held it in my hand for the rest of the ride. ("Here I was...", 1989, p. 32)

Still another survivor spoke about the first few moments after the crash:

The plane smelled like a house of fire. I was exhilarated to be alive but deeply grieved when I could see and smell death. It was like being at the doorstep of hell. I pulled out my Bible out of my bag. That's all I wanted. (p. 31)

There is something distinctive about sacred objects and spiritual resources more generally. They are "vital objects" (cf. LaMothe 1998), filled with energy and potential. They place life in a context of greater meaning, connect the individual to the past and the future, and link people together in communities with common understandings of the sacred and its symbols. Spiritual resources (e.g., letting go, active surrender to a higher power, spiritual conversion, prayer and meditation, spiritual support, rites of passage, spiritual forgiveness) are also particularly well-designed to help people in ways that challenge psychologists; namely, helping people come to terms with the limits of their control and helping people make fundamental transformations in the direction of their lives.

In support of these assertions, a number of studies have shown that people who draw on their spiritual resources in coping with stressful situations experience better health and well-being, even after controlling for the effects of a variety of psychological and social explanatory variables, such as social support, secular coping, health practices, and personality (Pargament 1997; Pargament et al. 2005). These studies suggest that spiritual resources contribute in a distinctive way to health and well-being.

Up to this point, I have focused on the positive implications of spirituality for the well-being of individuals and communities. There is, however, a darker side to spirituality. This leads to the final two implications of spirituality for human functioning.

People React Powerfully When They Perceive that the Sacred has been Violated, Damaged, or Lost

Violations of the sacred have profound effects. History has been punctuated by violence and conflict following perceived desecrations—from the Crusades to Osama bin Laden's justification of the September 11 attacks by statements that the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia violated Saudi soil. Sacred violations can take other forms: clergy sexual abuse, infidelity that violates marital vows, the breakdown of the covenant between companies and workers in the United States. On the one hand, violation of the sacred can undercut the ties that draw the members of a community together, as we see in many churches that have been perhaps irreparably damaged by clergy sexual violations. One survivor of this abuse commented: "I don't think I'll ever step foot in a church again... I lost my religion, faith, and ability to trust adults and institutions" (Matchan 1992, p. 8). On the other hand, sacred violations can draw members of a community together in support of vengeance or extremist reactions. We conducted a study relevant to this point following 9/11. We examined the reactions of college students in the Midwest and New York City. We found that students who perceived the terrorist attacks as a desecration reported higher levels of anxiety and depression (Mahoney et al. 2002). More to the point here, they voiced stronger approval of extremist responses to the terrorists, including the use of nuclear and biological weapons against the countries harboring terrorists, and the killing of the terrorists' loved ones. Thus, in the effort to preserve and protect the sacred, people can go to extreme lengths. Sad to say, if sacred objects can be seen as love objects, they can also be seen as sources of hatred. This leads to the final implication.

It Makes a Great Deal of Difference What People Hold Sacred

One of the oddest things about religious education is that it often ends just when it should be beginning. For many adolescents, religious confirmation signals the culmination of formal religious education. And yet, adolescence is the time when young adults are able to replace child-like conceptions of divinity and the sacred with more sophisticated spiritual understandings that are better suited to the

complexities of adult life. This premature closure leaves many people with “small gods.” Of course, it could be said that all representations of God are too small because the human is incapable of fully grasping the character of the divine. Even so, some spiritual understandings are more encompassing than others. Smaller gods represent a problem because they fail to shed light on the profound dilemmas of life.

Phillips (1997) illustrates many of these “small gods” in his book, “Your God is Too Small.” He describes the Grand Old Man “who was a great power in His day, but who could not possibly be expected to keep pace with modern progress” (p. 24); the god of Absolute Perfection who insists on complete and total loyalty and flawless performance; the Heavenly Bosom who provides limitless solace and comfort without ever asking for anything in return; and the Resident Policeman who serves as the “nagging internal voice that at worst spoils our pleasure and at best keeps us rather negatively on the path of virtue” (p. 15). To this list I might add the Distant Star god who observes life from a great distance but fails to warm the world with the qualities of sacredness, and the god in Retirement who has withdrawn from modern life following years of hard work in ancient times.

These limited representations of the sacred are ill-equipped to deal with the full spectrum of human potential and the full range of life challenges. They simply cannot fully contain the sacred. For instance, individuals with an overly strict conscience often view God as a “Resident Policeman” who frowns upon enjoyable experiences in life and spoils moments of pleasure with the threat of ultimate punishment. This harsh image of God, unsoftened by divine qualities of mercy and compassion, can add further pain to the most traumatic times of life, as in the case of the abortion activist who explained the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina this way: “In my belief, God judged New Orleans for the sin of shedding innocent blood through abortion” (The Blade 2005, p. A4).

Small gods are not limited to punitive beings. People who see the sacred as purely loving and protective are equally vulnerable to disappointment and disillusion, for they may be unable to reconcile their narrow, albeit positive, representation of the sacred with their experiences of pain, suffering, and evil in the world.

And small gods also create problems for whoever lies outside the protection of the sacred umbrella. Within every religious tradition, we find people who firmly believe that they hold exclusive claim to ultimate truth, and pity those who lie outside this sacred sphere. In a study of over 11,000 people from 11 European countries, researchers found that people who believed that “there is only one true religion” were significantly more prejudiced against ethnic minorities (Scheepers et al. 2002). Small gods are likely to

be perceived as vulnerable gods that require protection from external danger and, as a result, acts of violence against others can be perpetrated with a sacred seal of approval.

There is a darker side as well as a brighter side to spirituality then and, as a result, we have to be careful of simplistic generalizations when it comes to spiritual life. I like the way Sarason (2001) put it: “To proclaim one’s spirituality is not inherently a badge of honor or dishonor. We should judge such proclamations not only for what they mean for one’s sense of belonging and community but also for what they mean for one’s sense of belonging of others in different collectivities” (p. 600).

Making the Sacred Character of Community Life More Explicit: Implications for the Field of Community Psychology

I have argued here that sacred matters really matter, that spirituality is a distinctive and irreducible dimension of life, one that holds significant implications for health and well-being. I would like to conclude my talk by calling for more explicit attention to the sacred character of community life in our work as community psychologists. I would point to three tasks in this regard.

Learning About the Sacred Character of Community Life

Much of what we know about the sacred comes from studies of individuals. It is time to extend the study of spirituality to other levels of analysis, including marriages, organizations, institutions, neighborhoods, and communities. To do so, we have to get closer to spiritual settings. Religious institutions are an obvious place to start. I remember my own initial anxiety when I decided to start “going to church.” How would they respond to visits from a Jewish guy, I wondered? Would I be shunned, pitied, rebuked, forceably removed, or even worse, converted? None of these things happened. The churches were warm and welcoming, more than happy to get to know me and share in their spiritual lives. In getting closer to spiritual settings, I believe we will have many of our fears, misconceptions, and stereotypes corrected. And in getting closer, we will begin to see that spiritual settings are far from uniform; they are exceptionally diverse in form and function (Maton and Pargament 1987; Pargament and Maton 2000; Roberts and Thorsheim 1987).

I want to stress though that religious institutions are not the only places to learn about the sacred. We can find the sacred in every setting, from families to businesses to

hospitals to universities (including psychology departments) to Moehringer's neighborhood bar. The sacred is not difficult to study because it's not around much anymore. It's not hard to study because it is located only in religious institutions. It is difficult to study because it a part of daily life (Capps 1977).

To learn more about the sacred character of community life we have to make the sacred more explicit in our questions, our measures, and our conversations. What does your community hold sacred? What legacy does your community want to pass on to the generations that follow? In what ways does your community nurture your spirituality? In what ways has your community disappointed or hurt you spiritually? Questions such as these can open the door to a deeper level of discourse, if we are also willing to learn to speak the language of the sacred. This was the conclusion Docecki et al. (2001) reached following their 10-year participant observation research and consultation project in a Roman Catholic parish. Breaking with the psychological tradition of seeking a detached objectivity, they concluded that "adopting the spiritual and religious language and categories of the 'natives' was necessary" (p. 515) to reach a more authentic understanding of the parish.

Learning from Spiritual Communities

In learning more *about* the sacred character of community, I believe we will discover that we have something to learn *from* spiritual communities. Let me offer two examples here.

Transcendent Visions

Spiritual communities have something to teach us about transcendent visions. Berkowitz (2000) once noted that: "However brilliant Saul Alinsky was, the Sermon on the Mount will outlive Rules for Radicals" (p. 352). What's the difference? Both works dealt with powerful issues, both were well-articulated, both advocated for ways to improve our lives, and both were provocative, even revolutionary. I would say that the staying power of the Sermon on the Mount, as well as that of other lasting religious messages such as Martin Luther King Junior's I Have a Dream speech, is tied to their sacred character. Spiritual communities at their best provide their adherents with visions that: (a) link individuals' lives to a larger transcendent purpose; (b) offer a compelling sense of what is ultimately true in the world—what is "really, real," and; (c) provide the secure footing that there are aspects of individual lives, the world, and the universe that are inextinguishable. These spiritualized visions of life, visions that are embedded in a sacred matrix, take on a special power.

Becker (1998) illustrated this point in her participant-observation case study of two congregations in Oak Park, Illinois that became racially inclusive, adopting a multi-racial and multicultural identity. Central to the change in both congregations was the framing of the new multi-racial mission in the context of religious metaphors and tradition. The pastor of one fundamentalist Baptist church consciously built on the congregation's heritage by redefining it as "the New Testament Church," a place in which people of all backgrounds come together to share in the goal of 'lifting up Jesus Christ.' The pastor's phrase, 'It's okay to be different, as long as you're not different from the Lord' (p. 457) became a motto for the church. Focusing on the overarching spiritual goal of the institution helped the church thrive in spite of the differences of church members. A second Lutheran church achieved racial inclusivity by promoting the vision of "Community in Christ." For instance, one sermon concluded with the prayer, "Weaver God...thank you for weaving us together into a church, a nation, and a community with a thread of love" (p. 462). Here is one section from Becker's field notes. Listen to how notions of relationship and community in this church are so intimately connected to concepts of divine significance and sacredness: "Having friends and being friends, sharing the real joys and pain, helping the poor and reaching out to help the community, that is real. Christ becomes real in these activities, as in the bread and wine [of communion], as in prayer. When we are in touch with the real, we are in touch with the Holy One" (p. 462).

As community psychologists, I believe we are sensitive to the importance of overarching, guiding, and healing visions. But I also believe we have something to learn from spiritual communities about the value of wrapping our guiding visions into a larger sacred context. Yes, I'm talking about using the language of the sacred—transcendence, ultimacy, timeless truths—in our work. Oddly enough, talking about the sacred may seem heretical in this post-modern era when terms such as "truth," "transcendence," and "timelessness" are so out of fashion. Yet, in spite of our post-modern proclivities, I suspect that most of us can relate to the yearning for transcendence and the desire to discover deeper, lasting truths. I suspect that there are also occasions when we weave the sacred into our activities implicitly. But by recognizing this fundamental human desire and integrating it more explicitly and more fully into our work, we may enhance our ability to create lasting change.

Spiritual Transformation

Community psychologists share a deep interest with religion in provoking transformation, fundamental second

order change. We share the sense that something is askew in the world. Some of us talk about a shift from medical/treatment paradigms to prevention; some talk about a change from models of dysfunction to models of empowerment, competence, or resilience, and; some of us talk about changing from a person-centered to system-centered focus on human problems and solutions. The religions of the world are also built on the idea that there is something fundamentally out of kilter in the world and that radical change is needed. For a lot longer than psychology has been around, religions have developed and refined compelling methods of spiritual transformation, and I believe community psychologists have something to learn from these methods.

Three aspects of spiritual transformation are particularly noteworthy. First, they rest on meaningful explanations of human limitations, pain, and suffering. These explanations often radically challenge our ordinary ways of understanding ourselves and the world, be it the Buddhist view that reality as we perceive it is an illusion, the Christian view that to attain salvation we must let go of ourselves and merge with the divine, or the Jewish view that we are obligated to re-make the world in God's image.

Second, out of these explanatory frameworks come a set of spiritual practices that are transformational in nature. These include: the practice of meditation, a method designed to help practitioners detach from ordinary thoughts, feelings, and urges and experience reality through a more mindful, accepting consciousness; the conversion process in which people let go of their commitment to false or small gods (e.g., alcohol/drugs, narcissism, hatred, destructive relationships, materialism, food) and experience in its place a connection and identification with a higher power or God that is more capable of holding the sacred; rituals, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals, that publicly acknowledge profound changes in life and help people make the transition in roles, identities, and statuses. Concepts such as acceptance, mindfulness, letting go, surrender, conversion, forgiveness, and ritual have been, until recently, foreign to much of psychology, but there is much to be learned from these transformational spiritual practices.

Third, spiritual transformations generally unfold in a larger supportive context. The support may be seen as coming from God or the larger spiritual community, but in either case, the support helps ease the individual through the transformational process and sustain the commitment to change. Maton and Rappaport (1984) described this kind of support for transformation in their ethnographic and empirical study of a non-denominational Christian fellowship. Many members of the fellowship had experienced trauma, drug abuse, and despair in their former lives. But over the course of their involvement in the church, they

became newly revitalized and empowered. These changes were documented by self-report, interviewer ratings, and member and nonmember peer ratings. Maton and Rappaport (1984) attribute these profound changes, in part, to the support the members derived from the loving and caring image of Jesus and to the "gut level" experience of love, forgiveness, and caring from others in the fellowship.

I believe community psychologists could learn important lessons from spiritual communities by drawing on these powerful sacred transformations. One particularly promising area would be in the development of transformational rituals to signify the new transitions that have become increasingly commonplace in our day and age: divorce, unemployment, adoption, the return of a soldier from war, or the move of an elderly parent to a nursing home. All too often, these life-shaking transitions go unmarked, and individuals and their communities are left to transform themselves without the support of meaningful practices and rituals. With imagination, we could develop and implement new and exciting rituals to help people move through these critical points in time. This leads to the third task for community psychologists in addressing the sacred character of community life more explicitly.

Integrating Spirituality into Our Efforts to Better the World

Just as physical health is not the exclusive province of physicians, spirituality is not the exclusive province of religious institutions. Many people, including psychologists, have a vested stake in promoting the spiritual well-being of individuals and communities. We have already begun to make some promising starts in this direction by helping people draw on their spiritual resources.

Let me provide one example from the realm of meditation and health psychology. Though meditation is clearly rooted in religious traditions, most meditation researchers today do not see spirituality as one of the critical ingredients of meditation. Within the transcendental meditation literature, it is often assumed that it is doesn't matter what you meditate to as long as your mantra is meaningful to you. We wondered whether that assumption was true (Wachholtz and Pargament 2006). Would a mantra that was more explicitly linked to the sacred prove to be more effective in work with people experiencing one form of pain, vascular headaches?

We randomly assigned 83 people to one of four treatment groups: spiritual meditation, internal secular meditation, external secular meditation, progressive muscle relaxation. It is important to stress that the spiritual and secular meditation groups were identical to each other except for the nature of the mantra they used in their

meditative practice (“God is peace” versus “I am content” versus “Grass is green”). We instructed them in their meditative technique and had them practice it 20 min per day for 4 weeks.

The intervention proved quite effective. The spiritual meditation reported greater improvements than the other two groups with respect to frequency of headaches, pain tolerance through the cold pressor task, negative affect, trait anxiety, daily spiritual experiences, existential well-being, and headache management self-efficacy. The findings suggest that the spiritual element of meditation is a particularly salient resource, perhaps a critical ingredient of meditation, one that can be accessed in a comparatively simple and straightforward way in health-related contexts. More generally, this study underscores a simple point—spiritual resources have something distinctive to contribute to health and well-being. The challenge for community psychologists is to extend this type of research to social levels of analysis.

There are a number of opportunities for spiritual integration into diverse human institutions. Consider these key questions: Within community planning: How do we develop neighborhoods and communities that enhance a sense of sacredness? Within higher education: How do we create opportunities to address students’ spiritual values, questions, and struggles within the college curriculum and experience? Within the occupational realm: How do we foster the integration of sacred matters into the work culture? Within criminal justice: How do we inject spiritual concerns into the criminal justice system?

Obviously, there is no shortage of opportunities to bring the sacred to bear in human institutions. Note though that none of the questions above directly referenced other psychological and social values. I did not ask how we might foster spirituality in order to improve treatment compliance, reduce the risk of depression, increase job satisfaction, or improve the sense of community. Certainly these are all worthy goals, but I believe we have to be careful to avoid treating spirituality simply as a tool to be used to reach other values. We will be at our most effective when we approach spirituality as significant in and of itself, and I believe that in fostering a more integrated spirituality, we will also foster other prosocial goals.

Let me note one more, particularly vital question that we have to address if we are to integrate spirituality into our efforts to better the world. It is a question that grows out of the all-too-familiar examples of the consequences that follow when we step on each others’ religious toes or when we devote ourselves to images of small gods that care only for the members of our own tradition. Here is the question. How do we foster spiritual understanding and connection among people who are committed to different visions of the sacred? I don’t have an answer, but I think any answer

will have to make explicit the sacred character of spiritual conflict and community life more generally. I also think that that our field might have something important to contribute to the search for an answer. Here are a few possible questions we might pursue through research and practice.

How do we develop larger, more inclusive conceptions of the sacred without sacrificing commitment to those understandings? How do we promote greater spiritual openness and flexibility, and fight the problem of “spiritual arteriosclerosis,” hardening of the spiritual categories? How do we teach people to appreciate the distinction between symbols, which are always limited (see Neville 1996), and the deeper truths they are intended to reveal? Similarly, how do we teach people to appreciate that, no matter how noble the goal, the pursuit of the sacred is always human and imperfect and the possibility that every religious tradition may have something to offer to the search for the sacred? And finally, how do we develop interventions that build trust, understanding, and connectedness among members of different religious and spiritual groups?

Conclusion

There is a sacred character to community life. It may be hard to study, not because it is a tiny sphere of life, not because it is relegated to religious institutions, and not because it deals with arcane theological matters, but because it is interwoven into everyday life. The sacred is for many people, a powerful resource. It can also be a source of seemingly intractable problems. But the sacred is more than a source of solutions and problems, it is a distinctive source of significance. No other human phenomenon has as its focus the sacred. Psychologist of religion Johnson (1959) once wrote: “It is the ultimate Thou whom the religious person seeks most of all” (p. 70). To the spiritually minded, this focus is not illusory. Neither is it simply one part of living. It is instead the core of life. It is, the “really, real”—the place to be. I believe it is time to make the sacred more explicit in our theory, research, and action. In fact, any approach to community psychology that overlooks the spiritual dimension of life—our yearning for transcendence, our desire for deep and timeless truths—will remain incomplete.

Having said that, let me add a final word to my colleagues in the psychology of religion—any approach to spirituality that overlooks the communal dimension of the sacred will also remain incomplete. All too often, spirituality has been disconnected from our roles as parents, spouses, workers, residents of communities, or citizens of the world. Without the balancing virtue of community, spirituality becomes one more force behind the move

toward greater self-contained individualism in the United States, what Putnam (1995) captured in his powerful metaphor of “bowling alone.” By attending to the sacred character of community life then, we can enrich our understanding of not only what it means to be a community, but what it means to be spiritual.

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