The Holiness of Wholeness:

Religious Contributions to Human Flourishing

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Religion was a dimension of central value and interest to the founding figures of psychology, such as William James and Edward Starbuck. In sharp contrast, much of the 20th century was marked by antipathy towards religion among many leading psychologists, including Sigmund Freud, B. F. Skinner, and Albert Ellis. Over the past 50 years, however, many studies have shown positive links between religious engagement and flourishing (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012; Newman & Graham, 2018; VanderWeele, 2017). Most work in this area has attempted to identify specific aspects of religion that bode well for human functioning. For example, theorists have posited and debated various candidates for the benefits religion can provide, such as meaning (e.g., Geertz, 1966), emotional comfort and impulse control (e.g., Freud, 1927/1961), and social connectedness and identity (e.g., Durkheim, 1915) (see Pargament, 2013 for a discussion). There is, however, no need to choose.

We propose that the essential contribution of religion to flourishing goes beyond any single factor. Instead, religion is concerned with human wholeness—that is, how people put the bits and pieces of their lives together into a coherent whole. The essential glue from a religious perspective is holiness, or the sacred. We will discuss the intimate relations between wholeness and holiness. What lends unity to the lives of many people is the focus on sacred matters. Of all human institutions, religion is most uniquely interested in what people hold sacred and how they can develop and foster their relationship with their ultimate concerns.

With this perspective in mind, we will begin by briefly describing some underlying assumptions that guide our discussion of wholeness. Next, we draw on theory and research to examine three salient ingredients of wholeness, focusing specifically on religious contributions (for a more extended discussion, see Pargament, Wong, & Exline, 2016). These are not necessarily the only ingredients, but they provide a window into this construct. The three ingredients are: (1) the capacity to see and approach life with breadth and depth; (2) a life-affirming view of oneself and the world, and; (3) the ability to organize the life journey into a cohesive whole. Our focus here will be on “religion at its best”—that is, the contributions of religion to human flourishing. However, we also acknowledge the dark side of religion; though it can bring out the highest of human potentials, it can also lead to suffering and brokenness.

Some Underlying Assumptions about Wholeness

Wholeness, as we speak of it, has several qualities. First, it is not limited to any single attribute or even set of attributes. Instead, wholeness centers on the constellation of thoughts, emotions, actions, and relationships that define a person. Rather than referring to the person in isolation, wholeness refers to the person in relation to a larger social and situational context. In this paper, we examine wholeness from the perspective of the individual-in-context. Although it would be beyond the scope of this paper, wholeness could also be profitably examined from the larger vantage point of families, organizations, communities, and cultures.

Second, wholeness is not static. It is a dynamic process that continuously evolves over the lifespan. This property of wholeness has been incorporated into other theoretical models. In self-determination theory, Deci and Ryan (1991) speak of organismic personality integration as an active process which involves putting together aspects of oneself into a higher-order organization. In his theory of faith development, Fowler (1981) describes this process as a shift over time from fragmentation to greater wholeness. However, because life constantly presents new challenges and because people are limited finite beings, the movement toward wholeness can never be completed. At any point in time, we can examine where someone stands in their movement toward wholeness, but wholeness itself is an ideal and must always remain a work in progress (Pargament et al., 2016). From a religious perspective, the achievement of perfect wholeness may be reserved for the Buddha, God, or other divine being.

Third, wholeness is a capacity. Although some writers maintain that people are born whole or have an inner wholeness that can be released or freed from constraints (e.g., Palmer, 2004), we believe it is more accurate to say that people have a potential or capacity for wholeness that can be nurtured to a greater or lesser extent. In the same vein, Miller (2016) has described spirituality as natural and inherent, citing a body of evidence on the biological basis of people’s ability to relate to the sacred.

Finally, wholeness and brokenness are not polar opposites. No one goes through life without wounds, scars, and some degree of brokenness. These experiences cannot be fully eliminated—nor, perhaps, should they, as they may be sources of wisdom, growth, and an enriched life. Thus wholeness requires ways to incorporate brokenness (Russo-Netzer, 2016).

Religion and Wholeness

There is an affinity between wholeness and holiness. In fact, the term *holiness* has etymological roots in the Old English word *halig*, meaning wholeness, health, and happiness (New World Encyclopedia, 2008). Fostering wholeness and holiness are central religious tasks, as noted by classic and contemporary theorists. William James (1902) spoke about the vital role of religious experience in helping individuals move from a divided to a unified self. Similarly, Gordon Allport (1950) spoke of religion in its mature form as a “uniquely integral system” that attempts to organize all of life into a meaningful whole. (p. 124). Religion, at its best, can help to provide an overarching organization to all of the elements and ingredients of life.

Of course, not all people turn to religion as a source of wholeness. Many find meaning and structure for their lives outside of organized religion. They may take a secular approach, pick and choose from several traditions (Bibby, 1987), or design a more personal spiritual path (Russo-Netzer & Mayseless, 2014). Another important caveat is that religion can actually lead to more brokenness than wholeness in some cases. Yet, although the connection between holiness and wholeness is not a perfect one, we propose that religion can contribute to wholeness in important ways. Here we will consider how religion might contribute to three ingredients of wholeness: breadth and depth, life affirmation, and cohesiveness.

Religious Contributions to Breadth and Depth

Wholeness calls for a broad and deep orientation to life, one consisting of thoughts, feelings, practices, values and connections that can guide people toward significant purposes and goals. Religion is concerned with the life journey in all of its breadth, from birth to death and even after death. Pargament (1997) has noted that religions offer road maps for living. Every tradition specifies destinations people should seek and pathways to reach them. These maps provide direction in response to life’s great existential questions: Why are we here, and how did we get here in the first place? How should we treat ourselves and others? How do we understand and respond to suffering and injustice? How do we respond to the conflicts and divisions within ourselves? What happens when we die? The focal point of religion is a human being of breadth: an individual and a part of a larger collective, someone with a past, present, and future, a container of good and bad, and one who knows, experiences, acts, and relates.

Religion has to do with the depth as well as the breadth of life. To borrow from Paul Tillich (1957), religions address matters of “ultimate concern.” All deal with something larger than ordinary material existence, though in different ways: Buddhism offers an eight-fold path toward enlightenment; Christianity suggests a means to salvation by welcoming Christ into one’s life; Judaism asks its adherents to bring God into the world by living according to the Torah; and Islam fosters service to God via the Five Pillars. Broadly speaking, religions invite people to see the world through a sacred lens. Through prayer, meditation, ritual, or study, people are taught to find sacred meaning in even seemingly secular aspects of life, such as work, strivings, the body, sexuality, nature, the arts and humanities, family, and social change (Wong & Pargament, 2017). Life is experienced with greater depth and breadth when viewed through a sacred lens. Consider, for example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s well-known Sonnet 43: “I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach...”

People who perceive a deeper sacred dimension and integrate it into their life pathways and destinations tend to flourish, as shown in many studies (see Pomerleau, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2017, for a review). For example, Ellison, Henderson, Glenn, and Harkrider (2011) found that married partners who sanctified their marriages reported greater commitment, stronger bonds, better marital quality, and more positive emotions. Also, sanctification of marriage buffered the effects of perceived stress and financial problems on marital quality.

People who have experiences that extend beyond ordinary perception and immediate material existence, such as mysticism, flow, and sacred moments, also report major benefits (Yaden, Haidt, Hood, Vago, & Newberg, 2017). For example, in a study of psychotherapists and clients, both groups were asked to identify an important moment in therapy (Pargament, Lomax, McGee, & Fang, 2014). Those who imbued this moment with more sacred qualities, such as transcendence, ultimacy, and boundlessness, reported a stronger therapeutic alliance, greater perceived gains by the client, and greater well-being of both clients and therapists.

A second example comes from music. “Music is the language of the spirit,” Arab Christian writer Kahlil Gibran (2008, p. 96) once observed. From Gregorian chants to Quwwali songs in Sufism and Tibetan Buddhist throat singing, diverse faith traditions have long utilized music as a vehicle for accessing the sacred. Research suggests that music does indeed elicit spiritual experience and related benefits. In a study of professional orchestra musicians across the U.S., most reported sacred moments in their musical lives, marked by experiences of deep interconnectedness, ultimacy, transcendence, and boundlessness (Wong & Pargament, 2018). These perceptions predicted greater job satisfaction and work-related meaning after controlling for demographic variables. Music is, in short, one of the arts and humanities that offers pathways towards greater wholeness and holiness.

Religious Contributions to Life Affirmation

Wholeness also rests on an affirming approach to life (cf. Doehring, 2015), one replete with hope, support, and compassion in relation to oneself, other people, the world, the sacred, and life itself. We propose that religions can be valuable sources of life affirmation. Rather than denying the reality of evil, pain, and suffering, religions place these darker aspects of life into a spiritual context which offers ways to achieve enlightenment, salvation, liberation, and eternal life in spite of life’s challenges. Self-compassion, for example, is a practice rooted in Buddhism that fosters non-judgment, awareness of one’s suffering, and efforts to attend to it (Neff & Dahm, 2015). In a sample of Iranian Muslims, self-compassion was linked with greater autonomy, competency, feelings of relatedness, and ability to integrate past and present experiences with hopes for the future (Ghorbani, Watson, Chen, & Norballa, 2012).

Empirical studies have also shown that religiousness is associated not with the denial or suppression of pain, but with a more positive reappraisal of stressful situations (Vishkin et al., 2016). One caregiver to parents with Alzheimer’s disease put it this way: “It is the most rewarding and devastating experience of my life. . . There has been combativeness, wandering – lots of frustrations. But I’m learning for the first time to take each day at a time. This illness is teaching me to gain strength from the Lord” (Wright, Pratt, & Schmall, 1985, p. 34).

Religious traditions offer their adherents a variety of positive coping resources to enable them to sustain themselves and even grow through adversity. These include guidance, comfort and care from God, spiritual support from family, friends, and clergy, and experiences of spiritual connectedness (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000; Wong, Pargament, & Faigin, 2018). This cluster of positive religious coping methods has been tied to greater mental health and well-being. In one meta-analysis of over 100 studies that focused on several predictors of stress-related growth, such as social support and optimism, positive religious coping was found to be the strongest predictor (Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009).

It is important to add that religious traditions are not solely focused on the well-being of their adherents. They also encourage care for others, as highlighted by the many faith-based charities in the world. An experimental study provides another illustration. When primed with spiritual words (e.g., “divine,” “sacred,” “God”), theists were more likely to leave money anonymously for a stranger than when they were primed with non-spiritual words (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). In a meta-analysis of 25 experiments, Shariff, Willard, Andersen, and Norenzayan (2016) found a robust effect: For believers, religious priming prompted prosocial behaviors and attitudes. Thus, the sacred can empower people to treat other people well.

Religious Contributions to Cohesiveness

A third ingredient of wholeness is the capacity to put thoughts, values, emotions, actions, and relationships into a coherent, integrated whole. This capacity consists of several more specific qualities, including an authentic guiding vision, wisdom and discernment, balance, and the ability to live with paradox. Religion at its best can foster each of these qualities.

Flourishing requires an authentic, overarching, and guiding vision that can organize life as a whole. A large body of research underscores the importance of living according to one’s authentic or true self in the pursuit of a higher set of strivings or purpose (e.g., Lenton, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2016; Schlegel & Hicks, 2011; Vainio & Daukantaité, 2016). Religion can play a key role in the development of an authentic guiding vision. Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl’s (1988) seminal work speaks to the fundamentally religious character of the individual’s authentic vision or meaning in life. He writes that there is a “right” and “true” meaning for every person, one that is “something to be found rather than to be given, discovered rather than invented” (p. 62). The discovery of this higher purpose, the one intended for each person is, from Frankl’s point of view, a key task in living. Research by Emmons (1999, 2005) has shown that people who report a higher proportion of spiritual strivings in their list of life purposes indicate greater purpose in life, greater life and marital satisfaction, and less conflict among goals. Those who instill greater sacred value and meaning into their life purposes also report more joy and happiness and better physical health (Mahoney, Pargament, & Cole, 2005).

Cohesiveness also involves wisdom, the ability to weave together the disparate threads of life into a fabric of “whole cloth” (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Discernment, or “knowing when to do what,” is a key element of wisdom and cohesiveness. Religious communities can contribute to wisdom and discernment by helping people make sense of their problems and select effective solutions. Perhaps the best known illustration comes from the Serenity Prayer by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a prayer central to the philosophy of 12-step programs: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” Empirical studies also support the idea that an emphasis on the sacred promotes wisdom. Practical wisdom has been conceptualized as a broad-based virtue that helps with translating character strengths into actions for problem-solving (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). Using a large, national sample of American adults, Krause and Hayward (2015) delineated pathways from church attendance to practical wisdom, which in turn related to a sense of connectedness with others, feelings of God-inspired awe, and life satisfaction.

Closely related to wisdom and discernment is the ability to find balance in life. Balance, James (1902) wrote, offers a necessary corrective to human excess: “Strong affections need a strong will; strong active powers need a strong intellect; strong intellect needs strong sympathies to keep life steady” (p. 333). Balance is an important value within many religious traditions. For example, Buddhism emphasizes the Middle Path of non-extremism, while Native American religions focus on harmony within oneself, with others, with nature, and with the spiritual world. Taoism encourages practices such as the martial art of *tai chi* to encourage the balance of *yin* and *yang* energies (see Wallace & Shapiro, 2006), and studies have shown positive associations between *tai chi* and psychological well-being (e.g., Wang et al., 2014).

Finally, cohesiveness calls for the capacity to come to terms with the reality that we are contradictory, paradoxical beings marked by inconsistencies in the ways we think, feel, act, and relate. Religion can offer ways to reconcile these incongruities. The penultimate stage of faith maturity, according to Fowler (1981) is a conjunctive faith, one in which the individual shifts from either/or to both/and thinking that is “alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions” (p. 198). Wholeness from this perspective grows out of a joining or harmonization of opposites (Russo-Netzer, 2016) embedded in the sense of an underlying, transcendent, and unifying reality. Rockenbach, Walker, and Luzader (2012) illustrated these points in a qualitative study of college students who were experiencing spiritual struggles. Their struggles were, according to the authors, “steeped in the conflicting, contradictory, and paradoxical aspects of life” (p. 62). Growth, they found, did not entail the elimination of paradox and incongruity, but rather a “spirituality of imperfection” (cf. Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992) in which the students could better reconcile important tensions: tensions between ideal and actual selves, revealed and concealed selves, self and others, and worldview and lived realities.

Religion and Brokenness

Yet for some, religion is not a source of breadth and depth, life affirmation, or cohesiveness; it can in fact lead to greater brokenness. Rather than fostering breadth and depth, religion can be constricting. For example, faith may be used to bypass difficult questions and existential realities by offering soothing but superficial reassurances (Fox, Cashwell, & Picciotto, 2017). Also problematic are narrow religious beliefs that exclude God’s protection and care from those who are different. These beliefs have been associated with greater prejudice and discrimination (Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010; Whitehead, Perry, & Baker, 2018). In addition, it can be challenging to develop and maintain a fully dimensional spiritual perspective within a materialistic culture that fosters a more one-dimensional world view. As a result, some are likely to experience what Gallup and Lindsay (1999) described as a spirituality “only three inches deep” (p. 45).

Other religious expressions may be life-limiting rather than life-affirming. Images of an angry, punitive God have been tied to poorer physical and mental health (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011). Religiously-based feelings of shame and guilt have been associated with a number of negative outcomes, including suicidality (Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000). When religious and spiritual struggles are left unresolved, they tend to erode one’s health (e.g., Park, Holt, Le, Christie, & Williams, 2018).

Furthermore, religion can contribute to incohesiveness rather than cohesiveness. How? In many ways: by guiding visions that are imposed rather than personally owned or set people apart rather than draw people together; by ultimately destructive visions that rest on demonic depictions of outsiders; by imbalanced world-views that focus on other-worldly concerns to the exclusion of making this world a better place; by encouraging a religious rigidity that limits the ability to practice wisdom and discernment; and by treating incongruity and paradox as problems to be solved rather as mysteries that are part and parcel of what it means to be human.

The darker side of religious life should not be ignored. But neither should it be overstated. For many people, including those undergoing struggles in their lives, religion and spirituality offer the possibility of transformation to a life of greater wholeness. Chittister (2003, p. 96) captures this potential:

The spirituality of struggle is . . . a spirituality that takes change and turns it into conversion, takes isolation and makes it independence, takes darkness and forms it into faith, takes the one step beyond fear to courage, takes powerlessness and reclaims it as surrender, takes vulnerability and draws out of it the freedom that comes with self-acceptance, faces the exhaustion and comes to value endurance for its own sake, touches the scars and knows them to be transformational.

Conclusions

The concept of wholeness both simplifies and complicates efforts to understand and foster human flourishing. It is a parsimonious construct, a metaphor that can unite a host of abilities, connections, and virtues that make us human. Wholeness, we believe, may be understood as a superordinate virtue, a major key to human flourishing and life well-lived. Yet the journey toward wholeness is neither simple nor straightforward. Wholeness is always a work in progress, never fully achieved. Further, wholeness cannot sidestep human vulnerability, woundedness, and brokenness; instead, it integrates and builds upon them. Fostering wholeness requires attention to the myriad bits and pieces that form a full life.

We have tried to clarify the meaning of wholeness by focusing on three critical ingredients and their intimate connections to religion. Wholeness and holiness, we have suggested, often go hand in hand. Of course, wholeness can be rooted in other contexts as well, such as culture, family, and educational institutions. Yet religion, with its distinctive interest in sacred matters, may play a special role in the process of forming the whole life.

Our focus here has been on religion at its best. But religion is not always at its best. If religion can foster breadth and depth, it can also contribute to narrowness and shallowness. If religion can encourage an affirming approach to life, it can also contribute to life-limiting views. And if religion can be a source of cohesiveness, it can also be a source of dis-integration.

Ultimately, though, religions often provide ways to help people move toward greater wholeness in spite of their brokenness, even when that brokenness is partly rooted in religion itself. The Japanese art form of *kintsugi* (golden joining) offers a compelling illustration. Reflecting influences of Shinto, Buddhist and Confucian thought, *kintsugi* involves preservation and repair of broken ceramic pieces by applying golden or silver filigree bonds that highlight, rather than conceal, the brokenness within the re-formed object. Through *kintsugi*, wholeness is literally created out of brokenness. The result is a new work of art, one of greater beauty than the original, unblemished ceramic piece.

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