

Judeo-Christian Perspectives on Psychology

HUMAN NATURE, MOTIVATION,
AND CHANGE

EDITED BY

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AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
WASHINGTON, DC

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Published by
American Psychological Association
750 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002
www.apa.org

To order
APA Order Department
P.O. Box 92984
Washington, DC 20090-2984
Tel: (800) 374-2721; Direct: (202) 336-5510
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Online: www.apa.org/books/
E-mail: order@apa.org

In the U.K., Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, copies may be ordered from
American Psychological Association
3 Henrietta Street
Covent Garden, London
WC2E 8LU England

Typeset in Goudy by Stephen McDougal, Mechanicsville, MD

Printer: United Book Press, Inc., Baltimore, MD
Cover Designer: Berg Design, Albany, NY
Technical/Production Editor: Tiffany L. Klaff

The opinions and statements published are the responsibility of the authors, and such opinions and statements do not necessarily represent the policies of the American Psychological Association.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Judeo-Christian perspectives on psychology : human nature, motivation, and change /
edited by William R. Miller and Harold D. Delaney.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 1-59147-161-3

1. Psychology and religion. 2. Judaism and psychology. 3. Christianity—Psychology.
I. Miller, William R. II. Delaney, Harold D.

BF51.J83 2004
261.5'15—dc22

2004009504

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A CIP record is available from the British Library.

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

13

SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE: A PHENOMENON OF INTEREST TO PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION

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And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands, and broke them beneath the mount. (Exod. 32:19)

He attacked first in the form of Desire, parading three voluptuous goddesses with their tempting retinues. When the Buddha-to-be remained unmoved, the Temptor switched to the guise of Death. . . . Mara was waiting for him with one last temptation. . . . Why not commit the whole hot world to the devil, be done with the body forever, and slip at once into the cool haven of perpetual nirvana? (Smith, 1958, pp. 94–95)

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying . . . My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Matt. 27:46)

The phenomena of greatest interest to scientific disciplines are defined not only by the disciplines themselves, but also by larger social and cultural forces (Kuhn, 1962). Religion is one such societal force that can shape the direction of scientific inquiry. Although the field of psychology has generally neglected those phenomena of deepest concern to religious and spiritual communities, more recently this picture has begun to change. With the rise of a “positive psychology” has come greater attention to religiously rooted constructs, such as forgiveness, gratitude, evil, and hope (see Snyder & Lopez, 2002). Religious traditions, however, point to many other potentially valuable objects of study for psychology. This chapter introduces to psychology a phenomenon of particular interest to the Jewish and Christian world—spiritual struggles.

According to most religious traditions, the pathway leading to the sacred is neither straightforward nor painless. It is, instead, marked by obstacles, difficult terrain, wrong turns, and dead-ends. Struggles in the spiritual journey are widely accepted within the world's major religions. Even the greatest

religious figures experienced periods of profound conflict and struggle in their spiritual quests. The struggle may be interpersonal, as we see when Moses shattered the tablets containing the Ten Commandments on witnessing the people of Israel worshipping the Golden Calf. The struggle may be intrapsychic, as illustrated by the temptations of Siddhartha Gautama as he sat beneath the Bo tree on the epochal evening before he became the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Or the struggle may involve the Divine, as we hear in the words of Jesus Christ on the cross, crying out to God. Thus, spiritual struggles may take different forms. All struggles, however, grow out of an encounter between an individual and a situation that endangers or harms the ultimate spiritual destination, be it the promised land, self-realization, or union with God. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, all struggles involve more than an individual and a situation; they unfold in relationship to a Supreme Being.

In Jewish and Christian thought, spiritual struggles are not simply "life stressors," "life crises," or "critical transitions." Instead, they represent crucial moments in time, when matters of greatest value are at stake. Spiritual struggles are spiritual "forks in the road" that can lead to despair, hopelessness, and meaninglessness on the one hand, and renewal, growth, and transformation on the other.

Despite their significance within the religious world, spiritual struggles have received relatively little attention from psychologists. Perhaps because of their own relatively low levels of religiousness (Shafranske, 1996a), psychologists have underestimated the importance of a variety of religious and spiritual phenomena, including spiritual struggles. Furthermore, psychologists have tended to reduce religious and spiritual processes to other, presumably more basic, psychological, social, and physiological dimensions (Pargament, Magyar, & Murray-Swank, in press). Spiritual struggles, for instance, could be explained in terms of more fundamental intrapersonal or interpersonal conflicts.

The last 10 years have witnessed an upsurge of interest in religion and spirituality as a dimension of life that is significant and powerful in its own right. In this chapter, we focus on spiritual struggles as a phenomenon of interest for psychology as well as religion, one that can shed further light on not only the spiritual side of life but also the life of the person as a whole. Throughout the chapter, we integrate the insights and wisdom gleaned from Jewish and Christian traditions with emerging psychological research and theory. We begin by examining the meaning of spiritual struggles and present data indicating that spiritual struggles are not unusual. Next, we turn our attention to some of the factors that may lead to spiritual struggles. We then review an emerging body of research that points to the significant implications of spiritual struggles for psychological, social, and physical functioning. We conclude the chapter by reviewing examples of psychological and spiritual programs that have been designed to help people address and resolve their struggles.

THE MEANING OF SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE

Spirituality can be viewed as a resource that helps orient and sustain people through major life crises and transitions. In fact, a number of studies have shown that spiritual beliefs, practices, and relationships can buffer the impact of life events on health and well-being (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Pargament, 1997). Spirituality is not simply a method of preserving and protecting people from psychological, social, or physical harm, however. For many, it is an ultimate value in and of itself. Within Judeo-Christian traditions, the highest of all ends is “to know God.” As Johnson (1959) put it, “It is the ultimate Thou whom the religious person seeks most of all” (p. 7).

From this perspective, life experiences cannot be understood outside of a spiritual context. Life events have an impact on people not only psychologically, socially, and physically but also spiritually. Furthermore, experiences that pose a threat to or damage the individual’s spiritual beliefs, practices, values, and relationships may be especially disturbing because they endanger those aspects of life that the individual holds sacred. People do not simply acquiesce to these threats, however. In response to spiritual challenges, people struggle to hold on to their spiritual values or, if necessary, transform their spirituality. In this sense, spiritual struggle is a distinctive and potent phenomenon, a way of coping—not in a mundane or trivial sense, but in its most profound form, when no less than the soul may be at stake.

The process of struggle is not easy. Struggles are just that, struggles; they are marked by expressions of pain, anger, fear, doubt, and confusion—all signs of a spiritual system under strain and in flux. In short, we define spiritual struggles as efforts to conserve or transform a spirituality that has been threatened or harmed.

Spiritual struggles can take different forms. Within Judaism and Christianity, three types of spiritual struggle are commonplace: interpersonal, intrapsychic, and Divine. The Hebrew Bible and New Testament are replete with stories of conflicts among families, friends, tribes, and nations, from the mortal struggle between Cain and Abel (Gen. 4) and the conflict between the Pharaoh of Egypt and the people of Israel (Exod. 5:14) to the disputes among Jesus’ disciples about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Mark 9:34) and the clash between the apostles Peter and Paul about appropriate spiritual conduct and matters of ecclesiology (Gal. 2:11–21). Certainly, interpersonal spiritual struggles are not a thing of the past. Nielsen (1998) found that 65% of an adult sample reported some sort of religious conflict in their lives, and most of these conflicts were interpersonal in nature. In a focus group study of older adults, Krause, Chatters, Meltzer, and Morgan (2000) identified several types of negative interactions among church members, including gossiping, cliquishness, hypocrisy on the part of clergy and members, and disagreements with official church doctrine. These struggles

may have been particularly painful because they violate expectations about how members of religious communities should enact their spiritual values with each other, as we hear in the words of one woman:

They get off in a corner and talk about you and you're the one that's there on Saturday working with their children and ironing the priest's vestments and doing all that kind of thing and washing the dishes on Sunday afternoon after church. But they don't have the Christian spirit. (p. 519)

Spiritual struggles can take place intrapersonally as well as interpersonally. Major figures throughout Jewish and Christian history have articulated important questions and doubts about matters of faith. For example, Ciarrocchi (1995) pointed out that the Christian spiritual master, John Bunyan (1628–1688), one of the most important religious and literary figures of his time, often experienced “tormenting doubts about his personal salvation” (p. 35). Many people currently experience such intrapsychic spiritual struggles as well. For example, only 35% of a national sample of Presbyterians indicated that they had never had any religious doubts (Krause, Ingersoll-Dayton, Ellison, & Wulff, 1999). Intrapersonal struggles may center around matters of spiritual motivation as well as faith. In this vein, Ryan, Rigby, and King (1993) contrasted religiousness that is personally chosen and valued (identification) with a religiousness that grows out of social pressure and feelings of anxiety, guilt, and low self-esteem (introjection). The latter form of religiousness, they suggested, is “characterized by experiences of conflict and pressure” (p. 588). Exline (2003) has articulated a related intrapsychic spiritual struggle, the tension between the pursuit of virtuous behavior as encouraged by many religious traditions and the natural inclination to pursue human desires. Paradoxically, she noted, attempts to cultivate the virtues may only highlight human limitations and imperfections. Moreover, Exline concluded, the struggle between virtuous strivings and vices may not be easily resolved, given the limited human capacity for self-control and the temptations the environment provides for gratification of the appetites.

Finally, and perhaps most important, spiritual struggles may reflect a tension between the individual and the Divine. Leading figures in Judeo-Christian history did not hesitate to share their feelings with God and, at times, even to argue with God. In the Psalms of David, we hear many expressions of pain and frustration with God:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent. (Psalms 22:1–2)

Today Jews and Christians generally view God as a loving, all-powerful Being who is directly involved in their lives, ensuring that goodness will be

ultimately rewarded (Pargament & Hahn, 1986). Critical life events, however, can throw this view of God into question, leading to struggles with the Divine. Consider the painful doubts of a 14-year-old Nicaraguan girl:

Many times I wonder how there can be a God—a *loving* God and *where* He is. . . . I don't understand why He lets little children in Third World countries die of starvation or diseases that could have been cured if they would have had the right medicines or doctors. I believe in God and I love Him, but sometimes I just don't see the connection between a loving God and a suffering hurting world. Why doesn't He help us—if He truly loves us? It seems like He just doesn't care. Does He? (Kooistra, 1990, pp. 91–92)

In response to pain and suffering, people may struggle to redefine their relationship with the Divine. Survey studies show that approximately 10% to 50% of various samples express negative emotions to God, including anger, anxiety, fear, and feelings of abandonment (e.g., Exline & Kampani, 2001; Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1999; Fitchett, Rybarczyk, DeMarco, & Nicholas, 1999; Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000).

To conclude this section, we emphasize several points. First, although spiritual struggles can reflect tension and turmoil in an individual's social sphere, personal life, or relationship with God, these struggles are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, they may contribute to each other; conflicts with God may lead to interpersonal or intrapsychic spiritual conflicts. Spiritual conflicts with family, friends, or congregation could conceivably lead to conflicts with God and intrapersonal struggles. Consistent with this idea, researchers have found significant intercorrelations among indicators of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and Divine struggle (e.g., Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). Second, although spiritual struggles are not uncommon, it is important to remember that spiritual beliefs and practices are generally more a source of support and comfort than struggle and strain (e.g., Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000; Pargament et al., 1998). Finally, we must emphasize that spiritual struggles should not be equated with spiritual deficiency. Consider this example: "I am told that God lives in me—and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul" ("Perspectives," 2001, p. 23). This quote comes from none other than Mother Teresa. As noted earlier, over the course of their lives, even the greatest religious figures have experienced spiritual struggles. How do we account for these struggles? What brings them about? We turn our attention now to some of the factors that may lead to spiritual struggles.

THE ROOTS OF SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE

Jewish and Christian writings point clearly to one root of spiritual struggle—the confrontation with painful life situations. For example, in the

Hebrew Bible, Job faced stressors of the most extreme kind. After losing considerably valuable property and possessions (Job 1: 13–17), learning that all of his children had been killed (Job 1:18), and becoming afflicted with festering sores that covered his whole body, Job faced all three types of spiritual struggle. He experienced interpersonal spiritual struggles with his friends (Job 3–27), which were particularly painful for him because their response to his suffering violated his expectations about how members of his spiritual community should be there for one another during times of trouble. As Job put it:

A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty. But my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams, as the streams that overflow when darkened by thawing ice and swollen with melting snow, but that cease to flow in the dry season, and in the heat vanish from their channels. (Job 6:14–17, NIV)

Job also experienced intrapsychic spiritual struggles, such as religious doubts about ultimate justice in the world (Job 21:7–26). Finally, Job's afflictions led to spiritual struggles with the Divine. He stated:

God assails me and tears me in his anger and gnashes his teeth at me; my opponent fastens on me his piercing eyes. . . . God has turned me over to evil men and thrown me into the clutches of the wicked. All was well with me, but he shattered me; he seized me by the neck and crushed me. He has made me his target. (Job 16:9, 11–12)

The New Testament also includes illustrations of spiritual struggles that grow out of extreme circumstances. While awaiting his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus experienced an interpersonal spiritual struggle after realizing that his disciples had fallen asleep when they were supposed to be praying (Matt. 26:36–46). While preparing for his impending crucifixion, Jesus also experienced an intrapsychic spiritual struggle manifested as tension between his own desire and the pursuit of God's will, although he ultimately desired to fulfill God's will.

And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt. (Mark 14:35–36)

Finally, Jesus experienced spiritual struggles with the Divine, which can be heard in his anguish on the cross when he cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). Thus, Judeo-Christian perspectives suggest that distress and major life crises can elicit spiritual struggles.

Psychological research offers more systematic evidence of the link between struggles and stressful life experiences (Pargament, 1997). A significant number of people experience spiritual struggles when faced with major

life stressors, particularly stressors of the most extreme kind. For example, in an extensive survey of 708 Holocaust survivors, Brenner (1980) found that 38% of the survivors who were observant Jews before the Holocaust became nonobservant after. In contrast, only a small percentage (4%) of all survivors first became observant after the Holocaust. One formerly observant survivor put it this way:

I used to have a very personal, intimate relationship with God. I thought everything I did and every move I made God knew and was right there and He was participating in my life every step of the way. . . . That's the kind of person I was, and that's how observant I was then. Then the Nazis came, and where did He go? God was no longer near me. Disappeared. And I am no longer the person I was. (pp. 67–68)

Excruciating circumstances may not be the only factor that leads to spiritual struggles; whether life events elicit spiritual struggles may also depend on the character of the orienting system the individual brings to these experiences. The orienting system enables people to understand and deal with a variety of challenges and tasks in life (Pargament, 1997). It is made up of personality traits, worldviews, beliefs, attitudes, values, practices, emotions, and relationships. Spirituality is also a part of the orienting system. Some orienting systems, however, are stronger than others. People are most vulnerable to “disorientation,” spiritual and otherwise, when they encounter life experiences that push them beyond the capacity of their orienting systems. Thus, spiritual struggles may grow out of orienting systems that are characterized by weakness and vulnerability in personal, social, and spiritual domains.

In the personal domain, research has shown that poorer mental health has been associated with spiritual struggles. For example, trait anger has been associated with feelings of alienation from God (Exline et al., 1999) and other negative feelings toward the Divine (Exline & Kampani, 2001). In a study of religious coping among college students dealing with a variety of life stressors, Ano and Pargament (2003) found that neuroticism significantly predicted spiritual struggles, even after controlling for other potentially relevant predictors. Thus, certain personality characteristics may make people vulnerable to spiritual struggles during times of distress.

In the social domain, spiritual struggles have been tied to a lack of social support and, more specifically, family-related problems. For instance, Kooistra and Pargament (1999) found that higher levels of religious doubting among Protestant adolescents were associated with higher levels of parental authoritarianism, harsher styles of discipline in the family, perceptions of greater insincerity or less commitment in the parents' religion, higher levels of conflict in the family environment, and more conflictual relationships with mothers.

Finally, spiritual struggles may grow most directly out of the individual's spiritual orientation—that is, the character of his or her general spiritual

beliefs, practices, history, relationships, and values. Several limitations in the spiritual domain are worth noting. First, a narrow, undifferentiated spiritual orientation that does not adequately consider the darker side of life, such as evil and human suffering, may be vulnerable to problems. James (1902/1936) described this type of spiritual orientation as a “healthy-minded religion” (p. 125) and maintained that, although it has its advantages, it is ultimately incomplete

because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life’s significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth. (p. 160)

The failure to acknowledge the darker side of life leaves the individual both ill equipped to face painful experiences and ripe for spiritual struggle. Second, a spirituality that is not well integrated into the individual’s life may be more prone to turmoil. Years of exposure to religious ideas and practices may contribute to “spiritual resistance” to challenging and threatening life events. Along these lines, Brenner (1980) found that pre-Holocaust observant survivors who had no Jewish religious education were four times more likely to become nonobservant than remain observant following the Holocaust. Third, spiritual struggles may grow out of insecure religious attachments, such as an anxious–ambivalent relationship with a God who is seen as inconsistent and unpredictable or an avoidant relationship with a God who is seen as distant, disinterested, and uncaring (Kirkpatrick, 1992). In the face of difficult life experiences, insecure religious attachments may lead to spiritual struggles in which the individual must wrestle with feelings of Divine abandonment, anger, anxiety, or guilt. Consistent with this notion, Belavich and Pargament (2002) studied 155 adults waiting for a loved one undergoing inpatient heart surgery and found that insecure attachments to God were related to greater levels of spiritual struggle.

Although limitations in one’s spiritual orientation may lead to spiritual struggles, the problem here is not a lack of spirituality. Those who attach little importance to transcendent issues are likely to be spared spiritual turmoil. Spiritual struggles may have more to do with the quality of spirituality than the absolute level of spirituality. Still, even those with sturdy spiritual orienting systems are not immune to spiritual struggles. Recall the religious despair voiced by Mother Teresa and the struggles experienced by other seminal religious figures, such as Job and Jesus. Perhaps there is another possible factor that inevitably leads to spiritual struggles.

Judeo-Christian perspectives point to one other precursor to spiritual struggles. According to some Judeo-Christian perspectives, spiritual struggles in the form of a “dark night of the soul” are brought forth by God as a natural part of spiritual development (Saint John of the Cross, 1584/1990). The “dark night of the soul” involves an experience of spiritual “dryness” or desolation

on the part of the individual that is initiated by God to move the person toward spiritual maturity. According to Saint John of the Cross (1584/1990),

the Divine assails the soul in order to renew it and thus to make it Divine. . . . As a result of this, the soul feels itself to be perishing and melting away, in the presence and sight of its miseries, in a cruel spiritual death. . . . For in this sepulcher of dark death it must abide until the spiritual resurrection which it hopes for. (p. 104)

In this framework of spiritual development, the “dark night of the soul” is a “transitioning period of wrestling and struggling, which is clearly distinguished from the beginning excitement and joy [of spiritual childhood] and from the later sense of spiritual confidence that comes from a life of trials and walking with God” (Coe, 2000, p. 294).

In sum, spiritual struggles cannot be attributed to stressors or individual factors alone. Instead, struggles can be found in which people face critical life experiences that point to the limitations of their orienting systems and push them to consider new ways of thinking, acting, and relating to the world. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, spiritual struggles may be brought forth by God to move the individual toward spiritual maturity. Although this contention is beyond the realm of empirical science, the theological dimension of spiritual struggles raises important questions for the psychology of religion. For example, are struggles that are perceived to be brought forth by God more or less harmful than struggles arising from other factors? How might a “dark night of the soul” affect one’s image of God, attachment to God, or religious commitment? Such questions remain to be explored. At this point, the reader might be asking, why all the bother about spiritual struggles? Do they, in fact, have any implications for health and well-being? We now shift our attention to this important question.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE

Within Judeo-Christian traditions, spiritual struggles have been depicted both negatively and positively. Some sacred writings treat expressions of spiritual struggle critically. Consider a portion of the story of Moses. After leading the Jewish people out of Egypt, he reaches the limit of his tolerance when his followers complain about the lack of food and drink in the wilderness. At this point, God intervenes and tells Moses to speak to a rock, which will then pour out water for the people. Rather than speak to the rock as God had commanded, however, Moses, in a moment of weakened faith and anger with his people, hits the rock with his rod. God’s response is swift and severe. Moses will lead his people to the Promised Land, but he will not be allowed to enter it himself (Num. 20:6–13).

In many instances, though, interpersonal, intrapsychic, and Divine struggles are accepted as steps toward spiritual reconciliation and growth.

For example, within the Book of Psalms, the psalms of lament are marked by a formal structure that moves from struggle to resolution (Capps, 1981). First, a complaint is lodged with or against God (e.g., "O my God. I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not"; Psalms 22:2 KJV). The complaint is then followed by a confession of trust in God (e.g., "Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them"; Psalms 22:4 KJV), a petition for deliverance, and words of assurance and praise of God (e.g., But be not thou far from me, O Lord: O my strength, haste thee to help me. . . . I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee"; Psalms 22:19, 22 KJV).

The account of the disciple Thomas in the New Testament provides another biblical example of strengthened faith after a period of profound disbelief and uncertainty. Following the crucifixion and death of Jesus, Thomas refused to believe that the resurrected Christ appeared to the other apostles. He declared, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25, NAB). Thomas endured sadness, confusion, and undoubtedly castigation from the other disciples until Jesus appeared again a week later in the locked room. On this occasion, Thomas was present and exclaimed, "My Lord and my God," and believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. Although branded "Doubting Thomas," which serves as a reminder to Christians that even the most devoted often face periods of struggle and disbelief, he is also recognized for his devotion and loyalty to Christ and Christ's message (John 11:16). It is believed Thomas's faith was reinforced through Christ's resurrection and that he lived a life of missionary work and martyrdom in India.

From a psychological perspective, spiritual struggles can also be evaluated in positive or negative terms. Within many developmental theories, tension, conflict, or struggle of some kind are seen as a necessary ingredient for change. Piaget (1975), for instance, noted that a transformation in mental structures occurs only after disequilibrium, when the child's existing schemas prove to be inadequate to the tasks at hand. Psychologists of religion, from James (1902) to Batson (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993), have also commented on the importance of openness, curiosity, and flexibility as elements of a more mature faith. The deepest religious commitment, they maintain, is fashioned in the workshop of question and doubt.

However, according to some theories, there may be a price to be paid for spiritual struggles. The conflicts and inconsistencies that are a part of these struggles may produce dissonance and distress, particularly among those who view spirituality as central to their identity (Festinger, 1957). Struggles may induce shame, guilt, and alienation, especially among groups and communities that do not sanction open discussion of religious doubts and questions. Moreover, spiritual struggles embody fundamental questions about the ultimate benevolence, fairness, and meaningfulness of the world: Why do

people in my religious community speak of love but fall so far short in practice? Why am I tempted to do things I know are wrong? How can a loving God allow innocent people to suffer? These are questions, among others, that cut to the heart of our assumptive worlds, shaking and perhaps shattering our sense of security and well-being (Janoff-Bulman, 1989).

Empirical studies have begun to shed some light on the implications of spiritual struggles for health and well-being. Clear links have been established between various forms of spiritual struggle and indices of distress. Focusing on interpersonal spiritual struggles, Krause, Ellison, and Wulff (1998) examined negative church interactions as they relate to psychological well-being in a national sample of clergy, elders, and rank-and-file members of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Clergy and elders who were involved in more negative interactions in the church reported greater psychological distress; similar effects were not found for members. In a study of church members and college students, reports of interpersonal religious conflict and conflict with the clergy and church dogma were associated with poorer mental health, including lower self-esteem, greater anxiety, and more negative mood (Pargament, Zinnbauer et al., 1998).

In terms of intrapsychic spiritual struggles, more religious doubts have been associated with greater anxiety and negative affect among adolescents and church members (Kooistra & Pargament, 1999; Pargament, Zinnbauer, et al., 1998), more depressed affect and less positive affect among Presbyterian leaders and members (Krause et al., 1999), and less happiness and life satisfaction in a national sample of adults (Ellison, 1991). Also noteworthy is a study by Ryan et al., (1993) who examined internal religious conflict among church members and college students by a scale of "introjected faith" (e.g., "I turn to God because I'd feel guilty if I didn't," "I attend church because others would disapprove if I didn't"). Higher levels of religious introjection were tied to greater anxiety and depression and to lower self-esteem, identity integration, and self-actualization.

Several studies have linked struggles with the Divine to emotional and physical distress. In a series of investigations by Exline and her colleagues, feelings of alienation from God were correlated with depression among college students and adult psychotherapy outpatients (Exline et al., 2000). Difficulty forgiving God in a college student sample was associated with greater anxiety, depressed mood, trait anger, and problems forgiving oneself and others (Exline et al., 1999). Pargament and his colleagues have also examined the relationships between several indicators of Divine struggle (e.g., feeling punished by God, feeling abandoned by God, feeling angry at God, questioning God's powers, attributing problems to the devil) and psychological distress. They reported that Divine struggles are related to less positive affect, more depressed affect, and less religious satisfaction among Presbyterians (Pargament, Ellison, Tarakeshwar, & Wulff, 2001); more psychological distress among victims of the 1993 Midwest floods (Smith, Pargament, Brant,

& Oliver, 2000); and more symptoms of PTSD and callousness among members of churches near the Oklahoma City bombing (Pargament, Smith, et al., 1998).

Particularly noteworthy are a few longitudinal studies in this area. In a study of medical rehabilitation patients, anger with God was predictive of poorer recovery over the four-month follow-up period, even after controlling for depression, social support, demographic factors, and level of independent physical functioning at admission (Fitchett et al., 1999). Furthermore, the effects of anger with God on recovery could not be explained by the patients' general level of anger because general anger failed to predict recovery. In the longitudinal study of medically ill elderly patients (Pargament et al., 2002), indices of Divine struggle at baseline predicted increases in depressed mood and declines in physical functional status and quality of life over the two-year period, after controlling for selective attrition, mortality bias, demographic factors, and baseline health and mental health. Perhaps most striking, spiritual struggles in this sample at baseline were predictive of increased risk of mortality (Pargament, Koenig, et al., 2001). Even after controlling for possible confounding or mediating variables, including demographics, physical health, and mental health variables, Divine struggles were tied to a 22% to 33% greater risk of dying over the two-year period.

All in all, these studies show that unmistakable signs of distress often accompany spiritual struggles. But what about the other possibility? Can we expect only pain and suffering from spiritual struggles? Can people gain a keener sense of themselves, the world, and the nature of God from spiritual struggle? Here the evidence is more meager, perhaps because relatively few researchers have attempted to assess the positive changes that may follow from spiritual struggles. Nevertheless, a few studies suggest that people may experience some gain as well as pain from their spiritual struggles.

Magyar, Pargament, and Mahoney (2000) examined the impact of perceived sacred violations (i.e., desecrations) of romantic relationships in a sample of college students. Desecration, they found, predicted more negative affect, more physical health symptoms, and more intrusive and avoidant thoughts and behaviors related to the event, even after controlling for the number of offenses committed in the desecration and the negativity of the impact of the betrayals. It is interesting, however, that equally strong correlations emerged between desecration and the subjective experiences of post-traumatic growth (PTG; e.g., feeling self-reliant, changing or reestablishing priorities in life, developing new interests) and spiritual growth (e.g., growing closer to God, feeling more spiritual). Similarly, in a sample of adults who belonged to churches close to the site of the Oklahoma City bombing, reports of spiritual struggle were linked with not only more symptoms of PTSD and callousness toward others, but, once again, greater stress-related growth (Pargament, Smith, et al., 1998). Finally, a similar pattern of findings emerged in the longitudinal study of medically ill elderly patients (Pargament, Koenig,

Tarkeshwar, & Hahn, 2002); signs of spiritual struggle were tied not only to declines in quality of life and physical functioning and greater risk of mortality but also to reports of greater spiritual growth. Thus, it appears that religion and spirituality may play an important role in positive interpretations and resolutions following challenging life events. Yet what, in particular, might Judeo-Christian traditions provide for their adherents that contribute to these emerging findings?

One of the most significant and powerful beliefs held by Jews and Christians is the emphasis and importance of life and living, as well as death. In the Jewish tradition, for instance, the faithful make an effort to pass on their spirit and gifts to loved ones, human kind, and the earth. Through a life well lived, an individual leaves a legacy of love and caring to future generations. Christians believe that Jesus' life represents the dying and rising that they are called to endure. When people suffer any kind of tragedy, crisis, or challenge, they experience the death portion of the Paschal mystery (The two aspects of the Paschal mystery are first, that by Christ's death He liberates believers from sin, and second, by His resurrection, He opens for believers the way to a new life; United States Catholic Conference, 1994). Over and over in the Scriptures, Christians read how Jesus' resurrection has changed the ending of the story. There is no death so final that life (hope) cannot rise forth from despair. It can take a long time, and people need to be disposed toward looking for it, yet Christians are taught that life can triumph over death. As the New Testament asserts, "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit"(John 12:24, NAB).

Another important dimension of Jewish and Christian faith lies in the conviction that growth, wisdom, and understanding are ends to be attained in and of themselves (Pargament, 1997). Thus, struggle may be a necessary precursor to transformation. Perhaps only through adversity can some people devote themselves to the discovery of new sources of significance, such as recognizing new priorities, pursuing a healthier lifestyle, developing more profound relationships, and, ultimately, creating a closer relationship with God. To experience the Divine, even at the cost of challenge and struggle, is the highest aim within Judaism and Christianity.

Social scientists of religion aspire to better understand how religion and spirituality exert their dynamic influence on growth and well-being following negative life events. Whereas the Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices described here offer theological explanations, additional studies are needed to examine the potential gains people may experience through their spiritual struggles. At this point, the overall pattern of findings suggests that spiritual struggles are a double-edged sword. They have a destructive, even deadly potential. At the same time, they may have the potential to bring people closer to wisdom, maturity, and a sense of connectedness with the transcendent.

Many questions remain. Must people go through a “dark night of the soul” before they are able to grow through their struggles? Do people simultaneously experience both “pain and gain” from their struggles? Perhaps most important, what determines whether struggles will lead ultimately to serious physical and psychological problems or personal growth and maturation? One part of the answer may lie in the factors that precipitated the struggle. Unexpected life events that seem to defy explanation and fundamentally shake the individual’s orientation to the world are likely to be particularly problematic. The death of a child or a betrayal by a spouse would fall into this category. More predictable events (e.g., death or illness of an aging parent) and controllable events (e.g., moral lapses) may elicit spiritual struggles that are more easily integrated into a benevolent and meaningful view of oneself and the world. People who perceive their spiritual struggles in a larger spiritual context may also be more likely to grow from their experiences. For example, many people perceive their crises as “sent by God,” spiritual tests or trials that challenge them to move farther along the path to the sacred. These kinds of benevolent religious appraisals of life stressors have been linked with reports of spiritual growth (e.g., Park & Cohen, 1993).

Whether spiritual struggles lead to positive or negative outcomes may also depend on the individual’s ability to reach a satisfactory resolution to his or her struggles. An analysis from the longitudinal study of medically ill elderly patients is particularly relevant here (Pargament et al., 2002). The researchers speculated that the connection between spiritual struggles and declines in health might be due to the failure among some patients to resolve their struggles. To test this idea, they compared “chronic spiritual strugglers” (i.e., those who reported spiritual struggles at baseline and two years later) with those who experienced spiritual struggles at only one point in time and those who did not experience spiritual struggles at all. As predicted, the chronic spiritual strugglers were more likely to decline in their quality of life and, to a marginal degree, become more depressed and more physically dependent from baseline to follow-up in comparison to the other groups. Thus, the danger of spiritual struggles may lie less in the struggles themselves than in the risk of “getting stuck” in the struggles.

These findings, tentative as they are, underscore the importance of the individual’s access to the personal, social, and spiritual resources that are necessary to resolve struggles before they become chronic. In this vein, Magyar et al. (2000) conducted a series of path analyses, revealing that positive religious coping mediated the associations between desecrations of romantic relationships among college students and spiritual growth, posttraumatic growth, and positive affect; students who made greater use of positive religious coping methods (e.g., sought spiritual support, benevolent spiritual appraisals) following a desecration were more likely to report positive transformations in their lives. It appears, then, that pastors, religiously sensitive psycholo-

gists, and other helping professionals may have a significant role to play in helping people resolve their spiritual struggles.

INTERVENTIONS THAT ADDRESS SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES

We have outlined various types of spiritual struggles, the factors that lead to struggle, and the implications of struggle for health and well-being. Now we turn our attention to the various ways that helping professionals have attempted to intervene with such struggles. Several books and articles have been written about integrating spirituality and religion into psychological treatment (Griffith & Griffith, 2002; Miller, 1999; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Shafranske, 1996b) and adapting psychological techniques for religious clients (McCullough, 1999; Propst, 1988; Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996). Here, we focus on those interventions that specifically target spiritual struggles. This work is in its infancy. With a few exceptions, the evidence in support of these interventions is anecdotal and based on case studies. Nevertheless, these approaches to treatment are promising. Furthermore, explicitly rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions of thought and practice, these interventions represent novel methods of change for the field of psychology.

Interventions to Address Intrapsychic Struggles

Several pastors and clinicians have developed interventions to deal with intrapsychic spiritual struggles. For example, Evangelical Renewal Therapy addresses the discrepancy between an individual's beliefs and behaviors (Saucer, 1991). Saucer encouraged repentance as the mechanism of change. There are five phases to the process of repentance: analysis of moral action, rebuke, confession, prayer, and recompense (e.g., making amends through corporal works of mercy). This approach was designed to help Evangelical Christians cope with the emotional distress and self-defeating behaviors that result from failures to live by their values. Saucer elaborated, "The client's mistakes are rebuked, prayed over, confessed, and expiated" (p. 1103).

Genia (1990) described an "interreligious encounter group" that attempted to address internal spiritual struggles through a group format. A primary goal of this group was to remain open and inclusive of individuals from various faith traditions. In addition, religious doubts and uncertainties were normalized with group members encouraged to voice their spiritual questions. The group intervention focused on enhancing religious development through the exploration of spiritual conflicts, the resolution of internal conflicts, solidification of a spiritual sense of identity, and the development of personal spiritual goals. Group members helped each other discover their

own spiritual truths and answer difficult existential questions about death, freedom and responsibility, isolation, and meaninglessness.

Expressing doubts, questioning values, and fostering spiritual identity are particular ways to address intrapsychic religious conflicts. Richards and Bergin (1997) stressed the importance of this task in adolescent faith development: "Given that a major psychosocial task of adolescence concerns issues of identity . . . spiritual interventions that help adolescents affirm their sense of identity, worth and belonging, and clarify and internalize health values may be useful to them" (p. 251). In this vein, Dubow, Klein, and Pargament (2001) developed a psychoreligious program to help Jewish adolescents become more aware of, choose, and integrate Jewish values into their identities and lives. More specifically, the program, called "*Mi Atah*" (Hebrew for "Who Are You?") helps adolescents integrate into their lives several virtues: learning (the value of knowledge and the hard work required to get it), honesty (the value of being open and truthful with yourself, with others, and with God), *Teshuva* (repentance; the value of maintaining caring, respectful relationships with others and with God), and *Tikkun Olam* (the value of being a good person and repairing the world). This 12-week program used scenarios, role-plays, discussions, biblical verses, education about the Torah, and written exercises to address internal spiritual questions and conflicts faced by Jewish adolescents. The impact of the study was evaluated by comparing the Jewish adolescents pre- and postintervention on a measure of the salience of their Jewish identity and on written vignettes that were evaluated for the degree to which the students integrated Jewish values and resources in the process of solving common adolescent problems. Initial empirical results of this study were promising; the adolescents experienced significant increases in Jewish identity and integration of Jewish values and resources in the process of problem solving.

Struggles With the Divine

A number of interventions have focused on helping to repair or facilitate an individual's relationship with God or the transcendent. Some interventions address individuals' feelings of abandonment, guilt, anger, isolation, and distance in their relationships with God. For example, Zornow (2001), a Christian minister, created "Crying Out to God," a distinctive religiously based program that focuses on the psalms of lament. Through the process of lamenting, Zornow argues, the individual can restore a close connection with the Divine or the "I-Thou" relationship. He explained that the program is

for those who are going, or have gone through suffering and find it difficult to worship or pray. . . . This spirituality of crying out to God takes

seriously the spiritual struggles of the sufferer and their prayer life. Its goal is to encounter God in the midst of fear, pain, distress, and turmoil. (p. 2)

Zornow's program helps others go through a five-step process of lamentation: the address, the complaint, petitioning, vow to praise, and waiting. Lamenting gives broad expression to painful spiritual struggles and attempts to restore a connection with a Divine presence.

Other interventions focus more specifically on spiritual struggles related to particular life events (e.g., cancer, abuse, abortion, serious mental illness). For example, Cole and Pargament (1999) addressed feelings of spiritual disconnection and conflictual feelings toward God among cancer survivors. In one session, participants explored their feelings of abandonment, guilt, anger, and closeness with this God and how these feelings related to their illness. Visualization, discussion, and an adapted version of the "two chair" Gestalt technique were implemented in this session. Cole and Pargament (1999) wrote,

Through an imagined conversation with God, the individual is helped to reconstruct a relationship with the Sacred that integrates the negative affective response to the diagnosis and re-establishes a sense of trust, mutual affection and connectedness. (p. 403)

The results of this intervention revealed that pain severity decreased in the treatment group, whereas it increased in the control group. In addition, the level of depression remained the same in the spiritually focused group, whereas it increased in the control group.

The lack of control and helplessness that cancer survivors face in some ways parallels the spiritual struggles that survivors of abuse and other traumas encounter. For example, Garzon, Burkett, and Hill (2000) developed a 12-week group intervention for Charismatic Christian survivors of childhood sexual abuse. This intervention was designed to address struggles involving anger, forgiveness, shame, and trust. Various types of spiritual exercises and practices were used in the intervention, including Christian imagery, the concept of finding the "true self in Christ," redemptive suffering, and various forms of prayer. According to case studies, the four participants in this pilot project voiced satisfaction with the group.

Burke and Cullen (1995) developed a group intervention for women struggling with postabortion guilt, grief, and spiritual isolation. This Christian intervention used ritual, spiritual imagery, discussion, prayer, and "Living Scripture" to aid in the psychological and spiritual healing of abortion-related spiritual struggles. Living Scripture asks participants to imagine themselves as characters in various biblical stories. For example, in one session, the leader asks participants to visualize that they are the woman at the well in Samaria (John 4:4-30):

You are the woman carrying the water jug up to the well. You're feeling burdened. The weight of the earthen jug presses down on your shoulders. Your back and neck ache under the pressure. . . . Jesus looks deep into your eyes. He tells you about your life, where you've come from, who you've been with, what you're like. Jesus knows everything about you. (pp. 63–64)

Other spiritual exercises attempted to foster connection and reduce guilt. For example, one step focused on developing a spiritual relationship with an aborted child through a spiritual imagery exercise whereby the mother encounters Christ with the child and experiences reconciliation.

Finally, some clinicians have directed their attention to the spiritual struggles of those with serious mental illness. Kehoe (1998) has led and written about various Spiritual Beliefs and Values groups for seriously mentally ill clients (e.g., those diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression). In these groups, participants raise religious or spiritual concerns and explore their beliefs and struggles in an interdenominational, open-ended format. She has described the themes that have occurred repeatedly over the past 15 years: hopelessness, anger, abandonment, God's role in the illness, and differentiating spirituality from delusions. Kehoe believes these groups represent a valuable forum that enables people with serious mental illness to explore and heal their spiritual struggles.

Interpersonal Spiritual Struggles

Interpersonal spiritual struggles have received somewhat less clinical attention, with some important exceptions. Fallot (2001) described interpersonal spiritual struggles experienced by individuals with serious mental illness. He stated that, "Religious organizations can offer significant antidotes to the stigma often connected to mental illness. Consumers describe the empowerment that attends a sense of acceptance and belonging in valued faith communities" (p. 114). Fallot continued by noting that, "Many consumers have felt rejected by these communities" (p. 115). He suggested ongoing efforts at collaboration between faith communities and mental health professionals.

Interpersonal spiritual struggles do not affect only those with serious mental illness. Many people face spiritual conflicts and estrangement from friends, families, and their communities. Therapists have only just begun to address these conflicts. For example, Butler, Gardner, and Bird (1998) commented on how God can be a resource for resolving marital tensions. Prayers to God, they noted, are incompatible with spousal hostility, contempt, and negativity. Joint prayers, they found, calm and soften the level of conflict in the marriage. As one couple put it, "We've knelt down and prayed and it's amazing . . . what it does in softening our hearts" (p. 462).

Interpersonal spiritual struggles represent an important area for future intervention work. There are many unanswered questions. How can we help marriages in which spiritual violations (e.g., infidelity) have occurred? How can we aid blended families struggling over the differences in religious backgrounds and traditions each individual brings to the family? How can we assist congregations struggling with tensions between cliques and subgroups? How can psychologists and other helping professionals work together to resolve spiritual rifts and tensions between various factions within the community? Answers to these questions may help to alleviate some of the most intractable, painful, and destructive of all interpersonal conflicts.

CONCLUSIONS

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, we can find rich descriptions of many phenomena that are distinctively human. By attending more carefully to these phenomena, psychologists could develop a more complete picture of human nature, one that acknowledges our spiritual potential. In this chapter, we have drawn from Judeo-Christian thought to introduce one particularly important phenomenon of interest to psychology. Spiritual struggle is not to be confused with a secular psychological process. It is a distinctive form of tension and conflict that holds powerful spiritual meaning as well as significant implications for human functioning.

Spiritual struggles should be of interest to psychologists and religious communities. This conclusion is supported by a variety of empirical studies linking interpersonal, intrapersonal, and Divine spiritual struggles with indices of health and well-being. As yet, we do not understand the mechanisms that may explain these linkages. Spiritual struggles could be understood in terms of putatively more basic psychological, social, and physiological dimensions. Spiritual struggles have remained significant predictors of health and well-being, however, even after controlling for alternate explanations, such as trait anger, depression, negativity, and personality variables. Further studies may yield different results. At present, though, these findings are consistent with the conclusion George, Ellison, and Larson (2002) reached after their extensive review of the empirical literature on religion and health, namely, the religion–health connection cannot be fully explained by health practices, social ties, psychological resources, or belief structures. The alternative is to view spirituality, including spiritual struggles, as a significant dimension of human functioning in its own right (Pargament et al., in press).

Spiritual struggles are more than a response to trauma and transition. They are signs of crisis in and of themselves, signs of a spirituality under threat. As such, they are deeply disquieting, for they have to do with the most sacred of matters. Nonetheless, stories within Jewish and Christian literature remind us that crises of all kinds are not only sources of pain and

suffering, they can be precursors to growth. We have reviewed some preliminary evidence that suggests this may also be the case for spiritual struggles. The task for religious professionals, psychologists, and other helping professionals, then, is not to eliminate spiritual struggles, but to help people anticipate and deal with their struggles before they become chronic and before they lead to significant damage. To do that, we need to learn much more about how struggles evolve and how we may best help people in the midst of their spiritual conflicts. Promising programs have been developed by clergy and religiously minded psychologists. Research in this area is just beginning. Empirical studies of intervention are currently few and far between. This is, however, an exciting and promising area for psychological and religious study.

Perhaps we also need to think more about how to equip people to deal with spiritual struggles before they occur. A critical part of this process may involve improvements in spiritual education. Psychological and religious communities could work more closely together to develop and evaluate educational programs that destigmatize spiritual struggles, essentially normalizing these struggles as a common and, at times, valuable part of spiritual experience. Better education of children and adolescents is another important direction. Unfortunately, religious education often ends at adolescence, just when youth are developing the capacity to deal with abstractions, inconsistencies, paradox, and the complexities embodied in spiritual struggles. Educational programs could address various spiritual explanations, practices, and resources for dealing with pain and suffering, grappling with doubt, and resolving interpersonal conflicts. With more differentiated, more flexible, and better integrated spiritual orientations, people may be better prepared to wrestle with their angels and their demons, emerging from their struggles strengthened rather than diminished.

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