

(1997)

In B. Spilka & D. McIntosh (Eds.), Theoretical advances in the psychology of religion. (pp. 43-53).

Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

4

IN TIMES OF STRESS: THE RELIGION-COPING CONNECTION

KENNETH I. PARGAMENT AND CRYSTAL L. PARK

Each time I knew everything would be all right because I asked God to carry me through—I know that He's got his arms around me [report of kidney dialysis patient following several cardiac arrests and surgeries].

—O'Brien, 1982

Where we find trauma and tragedy, we often find religion. Anecdotal accounts, such as the one above, and empirical studies (e.g., Koenig, George, & Siegler 1988) point to this conclusion. This is not to say that there are no atheists in foxholes. As one victim of the Holocaust put it: "I didn't need the Holocaust as proof of God's nonexistence. I was never in doubt that He didn't exist" (Brenner 1980:96). Nevertheless, it remains the case that religion is commonly called upon in times of stress.

Surprisingly, social scientists have had little to say about the relation between religion and stress. Typically, religion has been viewed as a dispositional construct—a general set of beliefs and practices. Its applications to life's most critical moments have gone largely unstudied. And yet, these moments may offer a particularly clear window into the workings of religion. "As one stands face to face with the ultimate realities of life and death," Anton Boisen (1955) wrote, "religion and theology tend to come alive" (p. 3).

Coping theory provides one framework for understanding the role of religion in stressful times. Specifically, this chapter will treat the religion-

coping connection via three questions: What forms does religion take in coping? What determines the level and form of religious coping? How helpful or harmful is religion in coping? We will see that religion adds an important dimension to coping theory and research, one that should not be reduced to simple stereotypes. We will also look at some of the questions about religion and coping that remain unanswered.

DEFINITIONS

Coping

The term "coping" has a reactive connotation to many people, as if coping is simply a reflexive response to crisis. Coping is partly reactive. Life threatening illnesses, unexpected tragedy, and death are only a few of the events that have a press of their own, forcing people to respond in one way or another. But coping is not merely reactive. Coping is a goal-directed process; it moves to the future. People cope with crises to maximize whatever is of significance to them. Significance may be material, physical, psychological, social, or spiritual. And it may be socially valued (e.g., loving relationships) or condemned (e.g., drug addiction). No matter how it is defined, coping involves attempts to preserve, maintain, or transform the things that people care about most deeply. In this sense, coping has a dual character, embodying both action and reaction. It is a search for significance in stressful times (Pargament, Van Haitsma, & Ensing 1995).

Current theory considers coping to be a transactional process that involves personal, situational, and social variables (Aldwin 1994; Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Underlying the coping process are several basic assumptions: (1) individuals initiate coping when they appraise events as threatening, harmful, or challenging to objects of significance and when their personal and social resources are appraised as insufficient to the tasks of coping; (2) people draw on an orienting system of resources (e.g., financial, physical, psychological, social, spiritual) to generate specific ways of coping with negative events; and (3) the effects of stressful life events on adjustment are mediated by the individual's resources, appraisals, and coping methods. There is a large body of empirical support for these basic assumptions.

Religion

Like coping, religion is also a process. It too is a search for significance, but a search of a special kind. What gives religion its unique character is

the involvement of the sacred, however it may be defined, in this search (see Pargament 1992). Religion provides a number of special coping methods by which people attempt to conserve the things they care about most deeply. When conservation is no longer possible (e.g., the loss of a loved one), religion also offers a number of coping methods to help people transform significance—to give up what has been lost and to discover or create new objects of value.

It is important to add that religion is not simply a tool. It has as much to do with the *ends* of significance in living as it does with the *means* for attaining these ends. The world's religions offer their members a vision of what they should strive for in living. According to most traditions, finding and living close to the spiritual is the ultimate goal of life. Of course, the spiritual does not have to be defined in narrow terms. Many seemingly secular ends can be spiritualized or invested with sacred status—from baseball, politics, and war to the search for meaning, personal growth, and a better world.

Both religion and coping are concerned with the search for significance. However, not all coping is religious, for not all means and ends of coping are sacred in character. Similarly, not all religion is coping, for religion is concerned with the full range of human experience, not only the times of greatest stress. There are, though, many occasions when religion and coping come together—when people strive for significance in stressful times in ways related to the sacred.

THE MANY FACES OF RELIGION IN COPING

When it has received mention in the coping literature, religion has usually been described in a negative, stereotypic fashion. From Sigmund Freud to Albert Ellis, there has been a tradition of viewing religious involvement as a defense against confronting the painful realities of existence (see Pargament & Park 1995). A closer look suggests a more complex picture. Religion can be a part of every element of the coping process (Pargament 1990). We can speak of religious events (e.g., marriages, funerals), religious appraisals (e.g., God's will, God's punishment), religious resources (e.g., generalized religious beliefs, practices, orientations), specific religious coping activities (e.g., seeking spiritual support, doing good deeds), and religious objects of significance (e.g., closeness with God). In the process of coping, religion may serve as the independent variable, shaping coping outcomes, and as the dependent variable, shaped by the coping transaction. The broad and varied roles that religion can play throughout the coping process contradict simplistic religious stereotypes.

Functions of Religion in the Coping Process

Certainly there are times when religion serves the purpose of a defense, a protective device allaying anxiety for people faced with difficult and painful realities. Religion is more than a method of anxiety reduction (Pargament & Park 1995). People look to religion not only for comfort, but for meeting other important needs, including needs for intimacy, meaning, self-actualization, and spiritual fulfillment.

Various theorists have attempted to describe the central function of religion. Durkheim (1915) believed that the primary role of religious beliefs and practices was to unite individuals into a common society. Geertz (1966) considered meaning-giving as the most essential function of religion. Religion, he argued, is designed to fulfill the human need to find something comprehensible about the deepest problems of existence, such as suffering and injustice. Fromm (1950) asserted that humanistic religion has as its aim the promotion of human strength and growth. Finally, some theorists argue that the most basic function of religion is spiritual; to transcend oneself and embrace a larger order in the universe is the essence of religious life, a function that cannot be reduced to psychological terms.

Although theorists have debated about the most important purpose of religion, from our perspective there is no need to choose. Much of the power of religion in the coping process grows out of its ability to serve many different purposes and meet many different needs. To view religion simply as a defense against anxiety is to underestimate the multipurpose nature of religious life.

Religious Appraisals. In contrast to another common stereotype of religion, religious coping does not simply entail avoidance of difficult or undesirable situations. It provides many ways to appraise and respond to situations that challenge individuals' understanding of the world; some are passive and avoidant, but many are not.

Appraisals of potentially stressful situations involve determining the extent to which a situation is a threat, a loss, and a challenge to those things one finds significant and the extent to which their resources are perceived as adequate to meet the situational demands. Although some individuals experiencing crises may refuse to believe that God would allow such a negative event to occur, such blanket denials are uncommon. In this vein, a study of cancer patients found that measures of religiousness did not relate to reports of the presence of pain (Yates et al. 1981). Interestingly, however, the religious measures were tied to reports of lower levels of pain. Findings such as these suggest that religion may be more subtly involved in appraisal processes. Rather than being denied, negative events may be appraised in a more constructive religious light

(e.g., as the will of a purposeful God, as an opportunity to share in the pain of Jesus Christ, or as a challenge to grow spiritually). Not everyone, however, forms constructive religious appraisals. Religion can add negative appraisals of its own; stressful events may be viewed as punishments from an angry God or as outside the control of a loving, but limited, God.

Religious Coping Activities. Similar to nonreligious coping methods, religious coping activities run the gamut from avoidant and passive strategies to active approach-oriented strategies. For example, Pargament and his colleagues (1988) distinguished among three religious approaches to achieving control and mastery in coping. The first type reflects the form of religion often criticized by social scientists. Deferring religious coping places the responsibility for problem solving on God. Solutions are said to emerge through the active efforts of God alone and, as a result, the individual adopts a passive coping stance. The second type reflects more traditional mental health values. Self-directing religious coping assumes that God gives the individual the skills and resources to solve problems. Thus, the responsibility for coping rests with the individual alone. Pargament et al. (1988) defined and measured a third type of religious coping that involves active roles on the part of both the individual and God. Collaborative religious coping rests on the assumption of a partnership with God in problem solving. Neither the individual nor God is seen as passive; rather, both are active participants in coping. Not surprisingly, the deferring approach was associated with lower scores on measures of general psychosocial competence. In contrast, both the self-directing and the collaborative approaches were tied to higher levels of competence. These findings underscore the importance of distinguishing between types of religious coping.

In a more inductive approach to measuring religious coping, Pargament (1992) identified a number of other methods through interviews, surveys, and factor analyses: seeking spiritual guidance and support, doing good deeds, seeking support from clergy and congregation, pleading for a direct intercession from God, expressing religious discontent, and distracting oneself from the situation through religion.

The variety of religious appraisals and coping methods seems to parallel the variety of purposes of religion. To appraise a tragic event as the will of God may allow the individual to find some sense of meaning in an otherwise incomprehensible situation. To defer responsibility in coping to God may allow an experience of secondary control in an otherwise uncontrollable situation. To engage in a religious mourning ritual may facilitate the transition of the individual from spouse to widow to single adult in a situation that might have otherwise resulted in a loss of identity. In short, religious methods of understanding and dealing with nega-

tive life events may facilitate the conservation and transformation of many types of significance (Pargament in press).

Determinants of the Level and Form of Religious Coping

Why is it that some people engage in religious coping while others do not? There are two key determinants of religious coping. First, religion must be *available* to the individual. People cope with the tools that are available to them. Those who bring an underlying framework of religious beliefs and practices to crises are more likely to understand and deal with the situation in religious terms (e.g., Johnson & Spilka 1991). Similarly, people who are more involved in religious groups and institutions are more likely to draw on those resources for help in stressful times (Gurin, Veroff, & Feld 1960). The larger the part religion plays in an individual's general orientation to life, the more often and easily it appears to be accessed in the coping process.

But religious coping is more than a matter of convenience. Such solutions must not only be available, they must be *compelling*. This term has an emotional as well as a cognitive connotation. Compelling solutions not only make sense, but they feel right to the individual. In boundary situations, those that confront people with the inexplicable and irresolvable (cf. Little & Twiss 1973), religion may become particularly compelling. Pushed beyond their own personal and social resources, people may view religious solutions as the only viable routes to significance. Studies have found that religion is increasingly called upon in coping as situations become increasingly threatening and harmful (e.g., Lindenthal et al. 1970).

As the previous discussion suggests, a variety of individual, social, and situational forces come together to determine whether religion becomes available and compelling in the process of coping. These same forces converge to shape the specific form religious coping takes in times of stress. For example, Pargament et al. (1990) found that intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest religious orientations were associated with distinctive methods of religious coping with negative life events. Secure and insecure attachments to God might also translate into different forms of religious coping in stressful situations (Kirkpatrick 1995). Ebaugh, Richman, and Chafetz (1984) reported sharp variations in response to crisis among members of Catholic, Charismatic, Christian Science, and Bahai faiths. Different types of religious coping have also been found among people faced with different types of stressful situations, including deaths of loved ones, work-related problems, interpersonal conflicts, and health-related difficulties (Reilly & Pargament 1988).

Individual, social, and situational forces affect the specific forms of religious coping employed in the resolution of stressful encounters. In several studies, situation-specific methods of religious coping have proven to be considerably stronger predictors of adjustment to negative life events than general measures of religious belief, practice, and orientation (e.g., Pargament et al. 1990). Findings such as these suggest a mediating model of religion and coping in which life events and personal and social resources trigger particular levels and types of religious coping that, in turn, contribute to adjustment to crisis. Religious coping methods, then, are pivotal constructs. They help to explain how people translate the generalities of their orientations to the world into the specific resolutions of life's most difficult moments.

The Efficacy of Religion in Coping

How effective are religious attempts to cope with stressful life events? A straightforward approach to this question involves investigations of the relations between various aspects of religious coping and outcomes of the coping process. A more sophisticated answer to this question requires an assessment of the integration or fit between given religious strategies and the demands of the situation, the resources of the individual, and the larger social context.

The Straightforward Approach. Studies assessing the effects of specific religious appraisals and coping efforts are uncommon. However, accumulating research suggests that some kinds of religious coping are usually associated with more favorable outcomes. These include benevolent religious appraisals, spiritually based support, congregational support, and collaborative religious coping. For example, studies of attributional processes have found that negative events seem to be easier to bear when people understand them within a benevolent religious framework, such as the belief that a death or illness is the will of God or an opportunity for spiritual growth (e.g., Jenkins & Pargament 1988). Perceptions of support and guidance by God in times of trouble appear to be one of the most helpful forms of religious coping; higher levels of spiritual support are associated with favorable psychological outcomes (e.g., Park & Cohen 1993) and positive health-related outcomes, including lower mortality (e.g., Oxman, Freeman, & Manheimer 1995). Support from clergy and congregation has also been related to favorable outcomes in coping with difficult life circumstances (e.g., Gibbs & Achterberg-Lawlis 1978). Finally, empirical research has found that those who report having a collaborative

relationship with God in coping have better psychological adjustment to their stressors (e.g., Rutledge & Spilka 1993).

In contrast, some types of religious coping are associated with poorer adjustment. Several studies report that attributions of negative events to a punishing God are related to negative mood (e.g., Pargament et al. 1990). Expressions of discontent toward one's congregation or God tie to less favorable adjustment (e.g., Pargament et al. 1993). It is important to note, however, that these studies are cross-sectional in design. Although the correlations between these constructs may indicate that distress is elicited by coping, it is also possible that distress is mobilizing coping. Cross-sectional studies shed no light on whether religious coping has short-term or long-lasting effects. The relationship between feelings of punishment by God or anger toward God and distress may be short-lived and such responses could be indicators of a religious struggle with beneficial implications in the long run: Consider the story of Job.

The Interactional Approach. A more complex and interactional view of the efficacy of religious coping focuses less on the value of particular coping methods in themselves and more on the degree to which these methods are appropriate to the demands of the situation, well-integrated with the resources of the individual, and consistent with the characteristics of the larger social system (cf. Folkman 1992).

Demands of the Situation. Problems vary in their controllability. Research has suggested that active, problem-focused coping may be more effective when problems are controllable and, conversely, that passive, emotion-focused coping may work best when problems are not controllable (Vitaliano et al. 1990). Similarly, interactional effects might be expected in various types of religious coping. In this vein, Bickel (1994) examined whether self-directing and collaborative forms of religious coping were a help or a hindrance to Presbyterian church members dealing with situations they perceived to be controllable or uncontrollable. With uncontrollable events, self-directing coping style was associated with more depression. In contrast, a collaborative coping style was associated with significant reductions in levels of depression among those dealing with uncontrollable events. Other studies have also shown religion to be especially helpful to those in greatest distress (Zuckerman, Kasl, & Ostfeld 1984).

Individual Resources. Various types of religious coping may be more helpful to some individuals, with their own unique backgrounds and constellations of resources, than to others. For example, Park, Cohen, and Herb (1990) found that the efficacy of religious coping varied by denomi-

nation; for Protestant students, unlike Roman Catholic students, intrinsic religiousness buffered the effects of uncontrollable life events on subsequent levels of depression. For Roman Catholics, religious coping buffered the negative effects of controllable, but not uncontrollable, life events. The authors speculate that these results could reflect the relative emphasis on faith versus works in Protestant and Roman Catholic denominations. Other studies indicate that religious coping is particularly helpful to groups that tend to be more religious, such as the poor, elderly, female, less educated, African-American, and churchgoers (Veroff, Kulka, & Douvan 1981). By virtue of their ability to draw on a more fully developed religious orienting system, these groups may find it easier to generate compelling religious solutions to difficult problems (see McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman 1993).

The Larger Social Context. Coping takes place within social forces that have pushes and pulls of their own. When people fall out of harmony with their social systems or when social systems fail to create viable niches for their members, coping becomes more difficult. Rosenberg (1962), for example, found that Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish high school students reared in religiously dissonant neighborhoods (25 percent or less coreligionists) were more likely to have lower self-esteem, greater depression, and more psychosomatic symptoms than their counterparts who were raised in religiously consonant environments.

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT RELIGION?

Although religious methods of coping have been repeatedly linked to adjustment to major life crises, it could be argued that religious coping is simply a subset of nonreligious coping. Spiritual and congregational support, for instance, may be functionally redundant with more generic social support. Religious discontent could reflect a more general emotionally cathartic approach to coping. If this were the case then there would be no need to give religious coping methods any special attention. Measures of nonreligious coping would be sufficient. Several studies, however, have found that religious coping activities predict the outcomes of negative life events above and beyond the effects of more established nonreligious measures of coping (e.g., Maton 1989; Pargament et al. 1990).

What is the special dimension religion adds to the coping process? Religion offers a response to the problem of human insufficiency. As hard as we try to achieve significance through our own insights and actions, we remain human, finite, and limited. At any time, we may be pushed beyond our own immediate resources and left with our basic vulnerabil-

ities exposed. Religion holds solutions for those times when mastery, agency, and control—the usual guiding principles of coping—fall short. Faced with the insurmountable, the language of the sacred—*forbearance, mystery, suffering, hope, finitude, surrender, divine purpose, and redemption*—becomes more relevant. Spiritual support is available when other forms of social support are lacking; religious explanations become more plausible when other explanations seem unconvincing; ultimate control is still possible through the sacred when life seems to be out of control; and religion helps in the search for new objects of significance when old ones are lost or are no longer viable. In any case, religious coping complements nonreligious coping by offering responses to the limits of personal powers. Perhaps that is why the sacred becomes most compelling for many people when human powers are put to their greatest test.

CONCLUSIONS

From a distance any object, even the largest in the sky, looks faint and undifferentiated. Only when we get closer does it take on more dimension. Scientists as a group have been removed from religious phenomena, and their views of it have often been undifferentiated. But when we move closer to religion, we see that it too is multidimensional. The study of religion in times of stress offers a clear window into the concrete, intricate workings of this elusive realm. In this chapter, we have tried to show that religion serves many purposes and expresses itself in many ways through coping, in ways that do not conform to stereotyped views. We have noted how a complex of individual, social, and situational factors come together to determine the forms of religious coping that are available and compelling to people in stressful circumstances. We have identified methods of religious coping that are associated with better and poorer adjustment to crises, but we have also suggested that the efficacy of religious coping may have more to do with the degree to which the methods are appropriate and well integrated in the coping process. Finally, we have noted that religion seems to add another dimension to the coping process; it offers unique solutions to the problem of human limitations. These religious solutions deserve further research attention. They may shed light not only on religion but on the nature of coping itself. To push the point even further, we might suggest that studies of coping that ignore the religious realm remain incomplete.

Theory and research on religion and coping is only beginning. We have made a good start, but further work is needed. Microanalytic studies of specific forms of religious coping (e.g., confession, mourning rituals, or

religious reframing) with specific life crises represent one promising direction for research. Macroanalytic studies of religious coping measured simply and efficiently are also needed to model religion's role in the coping process. This research should go beyond its current focus on Western religion to consider the coping practices of other traditional and alternative religious groups. Longitudinal research is also needed to distinguish effects produced by the mobilization of religious coping under conditions of stress from the immediate and long-term effects of religious coping on adjustment. The study of religion and coping offers promise for the development of a more unified bio-psycho-socio-spiritual understanding of the search for significance in times of greatest stress.