

Predictors of growth from spiritual struggle among Christian undergraduates: Religious coping and perceptions of helpful action by God are both important

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ABSTRACT

Can people grow from religious/spiritual struggles? This project assessed religious beliefs and responses to a specific struggle among Christian U.S. undergraduates through an Internet survey ($N = 454$; 66% female). Most religious variables correlated positively with growth (spiritual and posttraumatic growth). Structural equation modeling identified two direct, proximal predictors of growth, both of which were specific to the struggle situation: positive religious coping (i.e. attempts to engage with God), and perceptions that God was initiating helpful action (i.e. communication or direct intervention; provision of encouragement, love or comfort). In terms of background factors, religious engagement, benevolent theodicies and positive relationships with God all predicted growth indirectly, through the above pathways. These findings suggest that among Christians, growth from struggle often reflects two sides of a perceived relationship with God: Perceived growth is related not only to actions people initiate themselves but also to actions they see as divinely initiated.

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Can people grow from struggle? Many psychologists would say yes. For example, developmental theorist Piaget (1954) proposed that when children encounter situations that do not fit with their expectations, they often adapt their views of the world to accommodate this new information. As part of his crisis theory, psychiatrist Caplan (1964) proposed that effective coping with life crises could lead to growth. William James, an early psychologist of religion, wrote about how negative emotional states and crises of meaning carried transformative potential, sometimes leading to redemptive experiences in which sufferers become 'twice-born' (James, 1902/1985). Drawing on his experiences in a concentration camp, Frankl (1963) wrote about how people seek – and often find – a deep sense of meaning even in times of profound suffering. More recently, empirically oriented psychologists have developed measures of posttraumatic growth (e.g. Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999), stress-related growth (e.g. Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), and spiritual growth (e.g. Cole, Hopkins, Tisak, Steel, & Carr, 2008), all of which emphasize the idea that suffering can prompt positive change. This project focuses on religious/spiritual struggles and factors that predict growth from such struggles among Christians. By religious/spiritual (r/s) struggle, we are referring to tensions, conflicts or distressing thoughts or feelings about

sacred matters (Exline, 2013; Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014; Pargament, 2007). These struggles might focus on the supernatural domain (God, the devil), on other people, or on the self (doubts, moral conflicts, lack of meaning in life).

Themes of suffering, struggle and growth in Christian teaching

As described in the Christian Bible (New Revised Standard Version), suffering and struggle are a normal part of life for human beings, including those who strive to follow God. Descriptions of moral struggles are central to the Bible, beginning with the sin of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). Jesus spoke of how those seeking to become His followers must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow Him (Matthew 16:24). Yet many Christians will have difficulty setting aside their own desires, leading to moral struggles. Christians may also see God as the source of their suffering in some cases, and this may lead to anger toward God, as reflected in the outcry of Job (Job 29–31). For example, in Job 30:21, Job says, 'You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me.' When facing intense and prolonged suffering, David cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

(Psalm 22:1), and Christ echoed these words when dying on the cross (Matthew 27:46). At the same time, God is often not portrayed as the source of suffering. The New Testament refers to the presence of active evil forces in the world. The apostles Paul and Peter instructed readers on how to prepare themselves to face attacks from the devil (Ephesians 6:10–17), who is described as a roaring lion seeking to devour people (I Peter 5:8). Many of Christ's miracles involved delivering people who were tormented by evil spirits (e.g. Mark 5:1–13). Interpersonal struggles were also part of Christianity from the start, because followers of Jesus were deviating from established religious authorities and also created a sense of threat for secular authorities. Jesus and Peter both warned that Christians would suffer persecution for their faith (John 16:33; I Peter 4:12–16).

Yet suffering and struggle also have purpose within the Christian worldview. The Bible provides reassurance that God accompanies us through the valleys of life (Psalm 23:4) and will provide strength (Isaiah 40:27–31) and comfort (II Corinthians 1:3–5). God uses trials as a means to purify people and refine their character, as in the metaphors of silver being refined (Isaiah 48:10), a vine being pruned (John 15:2), or clay being shaped in the potter's hands (Jeremiah 18:1–6). God also uses parental discipline to bring believers to maturity (Hebrews 12:5–11).

In the end, suffering and struggle can yield growth in the form of endurance (James 1:2–4), the ability to comfort others (II Corinthians 1:4), and the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23a). Paul describes how God's power is made perfect in [human] weakness (II Corinthians 12:9–10). Struggles may also bring an opportunity for believers to identify with Christ in His sufferings (I Peter 4:13), a process that may actually be necessary if Christians are to share in Christ's glory (Romans 8:17). Paul also reminds readers that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28), with the ultimate aim of being transformed by God into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

Spiritual struggles and growth: Recent research in psychology

In summary, both psychology and the Christian Bible suggest that suffering and struggle can lead to growth. Yet, from the standpoint of empirical research, evidence related to this point is very mixed (Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006). By far, the most consistent finding is that r/s struggles correlate with other indicators of distress, such as depression and anxiety (see Exline, 2013; for a recent review). Links between struggle and growth are

much less consistent: Some studies suggest a positive connection, whereas others suggest a negative connection or no connection (see Pargament et al., 2006, for a review).

The confusion is compounded by the fact that personal growth takes diverse forms. In this project, we framed personal growth as a combination of spiritual growth and posttraumatic growth. Although both types of growth are seen as positive or helpful, spiritual growth focuses directly on the spiritual domain of life and may include changes such as a deepened or more mature faith (e.g. Fowler, 1981; Streib, 2001), an increased sense of spiritual connection (Cole et al., 2008) or a greater sense of one's life as sacred (Cole et al., 2008). Posttraumatic growth, in contrast, involves positive change as a result of struggle with highly challenging life circumstances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Thus, a sense of personal growth might take the form of deepened faith or spirituality, but it might also reflect changed priorities, recognition of new possibilities or paths for one's life, or a greater sense of personal strength (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). In some cases, people may perceive growth in pulling away from a religious group or by questioning or rejecting previously held ideas about God or religion. Thus, changes that some faith insiders might view negatively – doubt, disengagement, disaffiliation or exiting from religion – may be experienced as growth by the person who has changed. This project steers around these issues to some degree by focusing on self-perceptions of growth among Christians. Yet it is still important to note that growth does not necessarily imply deepened faith, even if many Christians do show shifts in this direction.

What faith-related factors might predict growth among Christians?

Stressful situations are those that tax or exceed a person's coping resources, pushing them beyond what they can comfortably handle (e.g. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As described by Pargament (2007), people who are faced with potentially disruptive events or information can often conserve their existing beliefs by applying them to explain and cope with the situation at hand. But sometimes r/s struggles cannot be resolved using a person's current system of beliefs and resources. In such cases, struggles present a 'fork in the road' (Pargament, 2006), one that may lead toward spiritual growth or toward disengagement or decline (Cole et al., 2008; Pargament, 2007). In terms of predicting these outcomes from struggle, many variables are likely to be important, including factors related to personality, situational context, culture and nonreligious forms of coping. Our specific focus for this project was on several faith-related variables that could potentially predict self-perceived growth from r/s struggles among Christians.

The first two factors listed below are factors specific to a particular stressful situation; thus they should have more proximal effects in terms of growth. The remaining factors are background factors that might affect growth more indirectly through their effects on the proximal factors.

Positive religious coping

In response to stressful events, many people engage in positive religious coping (Pargament, 1997, 2007; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998), which involves attempts to draw close to God or to use faith as a resource. Studies have shown that positive religious coping is linked with indicators of growth (e.g. Desai & Pargament, 2015; for reviews, see Gall & Guirguis-Younger, 2013; Pargament, Falb, Ano, & Wachholtz, 2013).

Perceptions of helpful action by God

Although the religious coping concept typically focuses on human-initiated action, it may also be valuable to evaluate people's perceptions of receiving from God. These would be cases in which God, rather than the self, is seen as initiating the action. For example, Christians might experience a sense of God's presence and guidance (e.g. Hall & Edwards, 2002), or they may believe that God is communicating with them (e.g. Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Poloma & Lee, 2012) or intervening to help them with their problems.

Close, positive relationship with God

In terms of background factors that are not specific to a certain struggle, a key variable should be the perception of a close, positive relationship with God (e.g. Augustyn, Hall, Wang, & Hill, 2015; Hall, 2004; Hall & Edwards, 2002; Hall, Fujikawa, Halcrow, Hill, & Delaney, 2009). Specifically, seeing God as present in one's daily life, feeling secure in this relationship, feeling grateful to God and believing that God uses trials to transform people (Hall & Sarazin, 2011a, 2011b) should provide a foundation that would promote the faith-building coping strategies and perceptions described above.

Benevolent theodicies

Also potentially important are theodicies: beliefs about God's role in suffering (Hale-Smith, Park, & Edmondson, 2012). If people see God as all-powerful but benevolent in intention toward people (e.g. suffers with us; intends suffering for our growth; helps us to overcome suffering), such beliefs could foster positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors involving God in situations involving r/s struggle.

Religious engagement

As shown in prior studies (e.g. Cole et al., 2008), higher levels of engagement with religious/spiritual beliefs are typically associated with more self-reported spiritual growth in response to stressful conditions. Prior work also clarifies that religious engagement is associated with perceptions of a more positive relationship with God (e.g. Hall & Edwards, 2002) and higher levels of positive religious coping (e.g. Pargament, Feuille, & Burdzy, 2011), which should also indirectly predict greater spiritual growth.

The current study

The aim of this study was to examine these potential predictors of growth from r/s struggle in a sample of Christian undergraduates. The data were drawn from a larger project on religious and spiritual struggles that were not limited to Christian samples. As such, most questions were framed in a more broad, theistic manner rather than using specifically Christian terminology. Only those participants from the larger study who self-identified as Christian were selected for the analyses reported here. After examining correlations, we consolidated variables using a structural equation model. We expected the proximal, situation-specific factors (positive religious coping, God's helpful action) to predict growth directly, whereas we expected the background factors (religious engagement, benevolent theodicies, perceived relationship with God) to predict growth indirectly through their links with the situation-specific factors.

Method

Participants and procedure

This project drew from a larger study of r/s issues among undergraduates, which sampled students from three U.S. universities (one Christian, one private but not religious; one public). Data were collected over three semesters. All participants received partial credit in introductory psychology for completing a web-based survey. The sample used here ($n = 454$, 73% female, mean age = 18.8 years, $SD = 1.2$) included those who (1) listed a Christian affiliation on an open-ended item, (2) endorsed 'yes' on an item asking whether they identified their r/s tradition as Christian and (3) were able to recall and describe a specific r/s struggle experienced in the last few months. Common struggle types included moral (21%), divine (20%), doubt (18%), interpersonal (12%) and ultimate meaning (5%). Religious affiliations included nondenominational or unspecified Christian (49%), Protestant (27%), Catholic (22%) and Eastern Orthodox (2%). Most participants identified as single (99%) and heterosexual (94%). Ethnicities included White/Caucasian (74%), Asian/Pacific Islander (13%),

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations with growth.

	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	Range	Growth index (<i>r</i>)	Spiritual growth (<i>r</i>)	Posttraumatic growth (<i>r</i>)
Religiousness (index)	0.0 (0.9)	0.69	–	0.50**	0.58**	0.33**
Religious participation	2.3 (1.2)	0.89	0–5	0.46**	0.53**	0.30**
Religious belief salience	8.0 (2.6)	0.96	0–10	0.46**	0.54**	0.31**
Benevolent theodicies (index)	4.1 (0.9)	0.71	1–6	0.37**	0.38**	0.29*
Encounter	4.2 (1.1)	0.51	1–6	0.38**	0.40**	0.29**
Overcoming ^a	3.3 (1.2)	0.74	1–6	0.10*	0.09	0.10*
Suffering God	4.1 (1.2)	0.79	1–6	0.27**	0.26**	0.23**
Soul-building	4.4 (1.1)	0.81	1–6	0.21**	0.22**	0.17**
Providence	4.1 (1.2)	0.74	1–6	0.24**	0.27**	0.18**
Pos. relationship w/ God (index)	3.6 (0.9)	0.92	1–5	0.50**	0.56**	0.37**
Awareness of God	3.2 (1.1)	0.91	1–5	0.48**	0.53**	0.35**
Secure attachment to God	3.8 (1.0)	0.87	1–5	0.44**	0.47**	0.34**
Gratitude to God	3.9 (1.0)	0.93	1–5	0.43**	0.49**	0.29**
Transformational suffering	3.7 (1.1)	0.90	1–5	0.48**	0.54**	0.35**
Perceptions of helpful action by God (index)	0.0 (0.8)	0.63	–	0.57**	0.60**	0.43**
God offered love, support	6.5 (3.0)	0.94	0–10	0.55**	0.57**	0.43**
God took action to help (no/yes)	0.7 (0.5)	–	0–1	0.42**	0.46**	0.30**
Positive religious coping	2.6 (0.7)	0.87	1–4	0.67**	0.69**	0.54**
Growth (index)	0.0 (0.9)	0.64	–	–	0.91**	0.91**
Spiritual growth	4.1 (1.7)	0.93	1–7	0.91**	–	0.65**
Posttraumatic growth	2.5 (0.7)	0.92	1–4	0.91**	0.65**	–

^aOvercoming was omitted from the index due to low correlations with growth and the other VOSS subscales.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

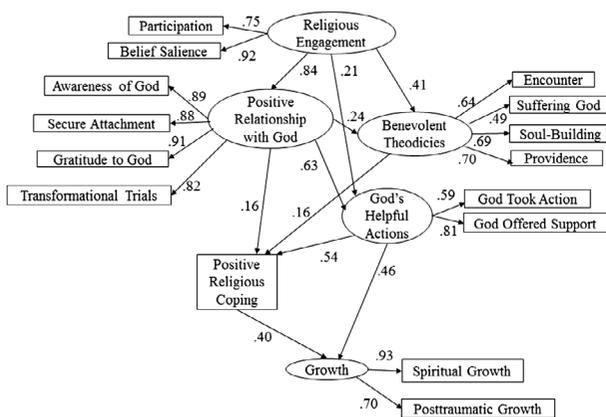


Figure 1. Structural equation model showing associations between predictors of growth. Model fit: $\chi^2(81, N = 454) = 218.17$, $p < 0.01$, $\chi^2/df = 2.69$, normed fit index (NFI) = 0.95, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.96, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06, PCLOSE = 0.03. All standardized path coefficients shown are significant at $p < 0.01$.

African American/Black (7%), Latino/Hispanic (10%), Middle Eastern (1%) and American Indian/Native American/Alaska Native (2%). (Percentages exceed 100% because participants selected multiple options as appropriate.)

Measures

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics (*M*, *SD*, α , range) for all variables. For ease of interpretation, all scales were scored by averaging across items. Within each category, scores were also standardized (where appropriate) and averaged to create index variables. These index variables yielded correlational results (Table 1) similar to those used

to represent the latent variables in the structural equation model (Figure 1).

Religiousness

We included four items on religious belief salience (a concept similar to intrinsic religiousness) by Blaine and Crocker (1995) rated from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). Participants also rated their participation in six religious behaviors (e.g. prayer; attending services; adapted from Exline, Yali, and Sanderson [2000]) over the past week from 0 (not at all) to 5 (more than once a day). Both measures have shown evidence of good reliability and validity as measures of religiousness in prior studies (e.g. Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011).

Benevolent theodicies

Participants completed the Views of Suffering Scale (VOSS; Hale-Smith et al., 2012), which assesses 10 theodicies (see Hale-Smith et al., 2012, for details on reliability and validity tests). Five subscales focusing on a benevolent God were of interest here: encounter, suffering God, soul-building and providence. Items were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). One subscale (divine responsibility) was excluded because of low internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.26$). The encounter subscale also had a low alpha (0.51) but was retained because it predicted growth.

Positive relationship with God

The Spiritual Transformation Inventory (STI; Hall & Sarazin, 2011a, 2011b) is a broad-based measure of relational

spirituality from a Christian perspective. The measure has undergone extensive development and validation over the past decade. Four of the STI's subscales assess facets of a positive relationship with God: awareness of God, secure attachment to God, gratitude to God and transformational trials. Items were rated from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very true).

Perceptions of God's helpful actions in response to the struggle

As in Exline, Park, Smyth and Carey (2011, Study 3), participants read, 'I believe that in this situation involving struggle, God _____ me,' followed by 10 items. Five items focusing on attributions of positive intent were of interest here: loved, comforted, strengthened, encouraged and supported. Items were rated from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). As part of a list of 11 newly developed items (most of which were not religious), participants indicated (0 = no, 1 = yes) whether they had this experience in relation to their r/s struggle: 'I believe that God did something (e.g., spoke to me; healed me; showed something; took some action in my life) to help me with the struggle.'

Positive religious coping

Participants read the prompt, 'In relation to this specific religious/spiritual struggle: To what extent have you responded in each of these ways?' They completed the seven-item positive religious coping subscale of the brief RCOPE (Pargament et al., 1998) in reference to the event. Items are rated from 1 (not at all) to 4 (a great deal). The Brief RCOPE has undergone extensive validation and has been used in many studies, some of which document that the positive religious coping subscale predicts improvements in psychological adjustment over time (e.g. Reynolds, Mrug, Hensler, Guion, & Madan-Swain, 2014; Rosmarin, Bigda-Peyton, Ongur, & Pargament, 2013; see Pargament et al., 2011, for a review and psychometric evaluation).

Personal growth

Participants completed an abbreviated version of the Spiritual Transformation Scale using the six highest-loading items from the original measure, which has shown good internal consistency and performed well in validity testing (Cole et al., 2008). The six-item spiritual growth subscale was of interest here. Items were rated from 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true). A sample item is, 'I have grown spiritually'. The survey also included the 13-item Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999), a shortened version of the well-validated PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Participants rated the degree to which they experienced each change as a result of their r/s struggle, with items rated from 1 (not experienced) to 4 (very great degree).

Results

Results across the three universities

For all index variables shown in Table 1, participants from the private Christian university scored significantly higher than those from the nonreligious universities, $p < 0.05$ using Bonferroni correction, whereas participants from the nonreligious universities did not differ significantly from each other on these variables. However, the overall patterns of correlations were similar across the three samples. Our primary interest here was in university students who self-identified as Christian, rather than in detailed comparisons of Christian vs. nonreligious universities. For the sake of brevity and simplicity, then, the analyses presented here aggregate results across the three university samples.

Correlations

Virtually all of the proposed predictors showed moderate to strong positive correlations with the growth index and both of its components (spiritual growth and posttraumatic growth) (see Table 1). The one exception was the overcoming subscale of the VOSS.

Structural equation model

A structural equation model (Figure 1) consolidates study variables and illustrates how they relate to each other. Variables in the top part of the diagram are background factors; those in the bottom part focus on the specific r/s struggle. All standardized path coefficients shown are significant at $p < 0.01$. Based on criteria commonly used in structural equation modeling (e.g. Hu & Bentler, 1999), the model showed an acceptable fit, $\chi^2(81, N = 454) = 218.17$, $p < .01$, $\chi^2/df = 2.69$, normed fit index = 0.95, comparative fit index = 0.96 and root-mean-square error of approximation = 0.06, PCLOSE = 0.03.

As predicted, both of the situation-specific factors – positive religious coping and perceptions of helpful action from God – directly predicted growth. These results highlight the idea that for Christians, growth from struggle is linked not only to one's own actions (positive religious coping) but also to helpful actions seen to be initiated by God.

Although the background factors did not predict growth directly, they all predicted at least one of the situation-specific predictors of growth. The perception of a positive relationship with God predicted more benevolent theodicies, more positive religious coping and much more perception of helpful action by God. Benevolent theodicies predicted more positive religious coping. Religious engagement strongly predicted perceptions of a positive relationship with God and benevolent theodicies, and it also predicted more perception of helpful action by God.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine several predictors of personal growth in the context of religious/spiritual (r/s) struggle among Christian undergraduates. Although many factors could affect responses to r/s struggle, our emphasis was on variables that were directly relevant to Christian beliefs and practices. We framed personal growth in terms of spiritual growth (Cole et al., 2008) and posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Echoing prior literature on the role of r/s in coping with stress (e.g. Pargament, 1997, 2007; Pargament et al., 2013), r/s factors that were proximal (i.e. focused on the specific struggle situation) predicted growth more directly than more broad, general r/s variables; however, the broad, general r/s variables did relate to the situation-specific predictors in important ways.

Positive religious coping and perceptions of god's helpful action

As highlighted in the structural equation model, the first direct predictor of growth was positive religious coping (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 1998). This variable focuses on actions that people initiate in order to engage more deeply with God or with their Christian faith. In terms of fostering growth, it was important for these Christian participants to engage in constructive, faith-building responses to the struggles that they faced. These results echo earlier findings showing robust ties between positive religious coping and growth (e.g. Desai & Pargament, 2015; for reviews, see Gall & Guirguis-Younger, 2013; Pargament et al., 2006, 2013).

The second direct predictor of growth involved perceptions that God had initiated some type of helpful action, such as communication, intervention, or the giving of comfort or support. This finding highlights the interactive nature of the human/God relationship as seen by many Christians, and it also suggests that both sides of this perceived relationship can be important in times of struggle. On the one hand, Christians can take constructive action themselves through positive religious coping; but it may be equally valuable for them to believe that God is also initiating actions to help them. Importantly, these experiences of receiving from God would not necessarily require any action on the receiver's part, other than perhaps remaining attuned and receptive to the possibility that God might be reaching out to help them.

A close personal relationship with God

Although these two situation-specific variables were the most direct predictors of growth, one background variable

was crucial in predicting all three of these positive variables: the perception of a close, positive relationship with God. This positive relationship included a sense of God's presence and direction, secure attachment, gratitude to God and an orientation toward seeking spiritual growth through trials. A perception of a close, caring, personal bond with God seemed to provide a foundation to support positive actions and perceptions regarding God in response to a specific r/s struggle. These findings complement the growing body of literature on relational spirituality among Christians (e.g. Augustyn et al., *in press*; Hall, 2004; Hall & Edwards, 2002; Hall et al., 2009), and they echo a phrase popular among modern Christians when describing their faith: 'It's not just a religion; it's a relationship'.

Benevolent theodicies

Beliefs about God and suffering (theodicies) also played an indirect role in predicting growth. The VOSS subscales of encounter (seeing suffering as a divine encounter), providence (seeing God as having control over suffering), suffering God (believing that God suffers along with people) and soul-building (believing that God uses suffering for our personal growth) all correlated with greater growth (Table 1). In the model, these beliefs predicted growth indirectly through their links with positive religious coping: Christians who believed that God played a benevolent role in suffering were more likely to engage their faith and try to draw close to God.

Religious engagement

The religious engagement variable assessed the salience of religious beliefs in one's daily life, as well as participation in Christian practices (e.g. prayer, service attendance, thinking and talking about one's faith). This variable played a clear, albeit indirect, role in predicting greater growth. Christians who were more engaged in their faith were much more likely to see themselves as having a close, positive relationship with God and also reported more benevolent theodicies and perceptions of helpful action by God. In short, a deeper level of religious engagement clearly set the stage for Christians to respond to struggle in faith-building ways.

Limitations and future directions

This study was limited by its cross-sectional, self-report design and its reliance on a sample of U.S. undergraduates. Response sets can be an issue with Likert-style surveys and in some cases can inflate observed associations. Results may not generalize to different demographic groups. The project was part of a larger study that was designed for

students from diverse religious backgrounds (including no religion). Thus, although most measures were relevant to Christians, they were not specific to Christians. In future work that is designed for Christian populations, it would be useful to include fine-grained and in-depth assessment of concepts that are more specific to Christians, such as beliefs about the Trinity, sanctification and grace. Future studies should include more in-depth assessment of constructs related to the initiation of action by God (e.g. beliefs about divine intervention; perceptions of hearing from God; and mystical experiences). It could also be interesting to consider the use of specific Bible verses, forms of prayer or virtue development exercises as parts of interventions for spiritual struggle.

Conclusion

Perhaps the old adage that ‘suffering builds character’ is overstated. Research on r/s struggle suggests that many people are deeply wounded by their struggles. And yet, consistent with Christian teachings, struggles can be a pathway to growth. This study helps to provide greater insights into how it is that young adult Christians may experience profound r/s struggles – and yet grow from the process. One clear take-home point from this study is that for Christians, growth is related not only to human-initiated actions (i.e. attempts to draw close to God); it is also related to a perception that God initiates actions to help and encourage those who are struggling.

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