

“SO FIRM A FOUNDATION”: WHAT THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGION OFFERS POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

We undertake Haidt's (2003) recommendation to positive psychology researchers to look to other cultures and eras for guidance in understanding some of Peterson and Seligman's "ubiquitous, if not universal, virtues" (2004, p. 33). We propose that religion is a fertile ground for study by positive psychologists, and may be one area where "common denominators" or mechanisms of producing character strengths and virtues may be unearthed through more systematic study. To demonstrate this, we pose hypothetical relationships between Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism and the character strengths of transcendence and justice (as typed by Peterson and Seligman, 2004), directly linking theological and cultural beliefs to the development of transcendence and justice. In so doing, we hope to open up new channels of communication between researchers in positive psychology and the psychology of religion.

KEY WORDS: religion, positive psychology, transcendence, justice

As positive psychology begins to define itself as a burgeoning field of study, researchers must carefully consider which sources to consult. Haidt (2003) provides four recommendations to positive psychology researchers if they are to be successful in contributing to a reappraisal of the discipline's subject matter: (a) begin with positive emotions, (b) look to other cultures and eras for guidance, (c) apply what is learned for the common good, and (d) examine peak experiences and moral transformations. Haidt's second recommendation suggests that there is not just one kind of flourishing and if psychology is to not repeat its mistakes from eras past, then we should recognize different cultural understandings and influences on human potential. Perhaps there is no better place to begin than to study the religious traditions that reflect and help shape a cultural perspective on human flourishing. Despite differences in epistemic claims and methodologies, a scientific positive psychology overlaps considerably with religion and spirituality in that both are concerned with virtue and successful living (Seligman, 2003)

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such that “the world’s religions offer highly developed and articulated visions of virtues, practices, and feelings, some of which may even be useful in a modern secular society” (Haidt, 2003, p. 286).

Actual religious and spiritual experiences differ between people considerably, and even the meanings of such words as religion and spiritual are far from self-evident. Our goal here is not to offer a concise and exhaustive definition of either religion or spirituality, nor even to advance the understanding of these terms beyond what has already been offered (see Hill et al., 2000; Pargament, 1997; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Rather, our preference is to follow the recommendations of the religious scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962/1991) who proposed that religious experience be conceived through two alternative terms, *cumulative tradition* and *faith*. Faith, according to Smith, “is not an entity. It is rather the adjectival quality of a person’s living in terms of transcendence” (p. 331) and “is what happens to or in a man when he responds to the universe in a way that has been made available to him by a cumulative tradition” (p. 330). We agree that religion is fundamentally a social phenomenon, and spirituality occurs at the individual level within a social context (Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Thoresen, 1998). We maintain that major religious cumulative traditions often provide such a social context within which mature spirituality is defined. Positive psychology researchers would be well-advised to take into account this context when studying the composition and development of character strengths, particularly those that comprise what Peterson and Seligman (2004) refer to as virtues of transcendence.

CORRELATES OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

The potential contribution of cumulative religious traditions to positive psychology is underscored by the fact that religion and spirituality are robust predictors of important psychological phenomena. Religion and spirituality are useful to basic psychological research in that they develop across the lifespan, are inherently social-psychological phenomena, and are related to both cognition and affect (see Hill et al., 2000, for a summary of this research). To this end, they should also be relevant to the study of personality. Prominent psychologists (e.g., Freud, Fromm, James, Jung, Maslow) have long argued that the study of the person is incomplete without consideration of religion and spirituality.

However, the majority of research, especially in the past two decades, has investigated religion and spirituality in relation to its application

of psychological knowledge. We will briefly summarize some of that literature, mindful that the empirical research to date tends “to elucidate the nature of a very narrow spectrum of the whole of human religiousness” (Miller & Kelley, 2005, p. 472).

Physical Health and Religion

The linkage between religion and physical health is now established to the point that researchers are beginning to tackle the much more challenging issue of specifying the nature of that relationship (see Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Oman & Thoresen, 2005; Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003; Seeman, Dubin, & Seeman, 2003). Powell and her colleagues provided what is perhaps the most methodologically conservative review of this literature and concludes that a religion-health relationship does exist, though it may be more limited and more complex than has been suggested by others (p. 50). Furthermore, virtually all such systematic reviews of the religion and health literature admit that we currently know very little about the linkage’s underlying processes, including those where religious or spiritual beliefs may have an adverse effect on health. For example, Seeman, Dubin, and Seeman (2003) maintain that a prudent interpretation (p. 61) of the available data suggests that religiousness and spirituality are somehow linked with cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and immune function physiological processes. However, they also acknowledge that we are far from understanding the specific nature of those linkages. Oman and Thoresen’s (2005) proposal that one of the many possible mediating factors is religion’s fostering of such classical human strengths as compassion, love, hope, and self-control, prompted them to suggest that researchers more directly consult with religious professionals to better understand such religiously related virtues.

Mental Health and Religion

Researchers have frequently noted that spiritual and religious participation and commitment significantly predict such quality-of-life indicators as happiness, meaning in life, and life satisfaction (Chamberlin & Zika, 1992; Diener, 1984; Emmons, 1999; Levin, 2001; Poloma & Pendleton, 1990). This supports Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) notion that spirituality and religiousness is considered a character strength because people with this strength hold “coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe and one’s place within it” (p. 533).

For example, in their comprehensive literature review, Poloma and Pendleton (1990) employed eight measures of religiosity and found that it was an important predictor of existential well-being, general life satisfaction and overall happiness. Similarly, Donahue and Benson (1995) conclude from their review of the literature on religiousness and adolescent well-being that largely positive correlations of religiousness (particularly intrinsic religiousness) exist with prosocial values and behaviors and primarily negative correlations with suicide attempts or ideation, alcohol and substance abuse, sexuality, and juvenile delinquency. This provides enough weight for them to suggest that “religiousness is associated with positive developmental outcomes” (p. 156). Subsequent reviews and studies by sociologists of religion (e.g., Regnerus, Smith, & Fritsch, 2003; Smith & Faris, 2003; Smith, 2003) echo these conclusions, and add that religious adolescents appear to suffer from fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety. Frederickson (2002) suggests that such associations could be partially due to the positive emotions activated by religious and spiritual experience that benefit health and well-being. The work by Ai and colleagues (Ai, Cascio, & Santangelo, 2005; Ai, Tice, & Peterson, 2005) points out that a spiritually based sense of hope and meaning contributed to positive attitudes as well as reduced depression and anxiety following the 9/11 attacks. Emmons (1999, 2005) argues that for the spiritual person, spiritual strivings (loving others, working on one’s marriage, reading sacred writings, etc.) are lived out on a daily basis within a framework of ultimate goals or concerns (knowing God or ultimate truth, achieving enlightenment, etc.) because of religion’s unique ability to function as a meaning system (see Hill, 2002; Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005; Paloutzian, 2005; Park, 2005; Park & Folkman, 1997; Silberman, 2005a, 2005b). Those spiritual strivings, Emmons maintains, have important implications for such psychological processes as personality integration and setting goals in coping with stress. Once religious meaning is established, it can be useful in understanding oneself, one’s purpose in life, and how one can effectively cope with environmental demands.

Religion as Social Capital

Religion may also serve the life of a community, thus creating what sociologists and political scientists refer to as *social capital*—an analytical framework of attributes of social organizations such as social trust, norms, and friendship networks that facilitate cooperative effort and

thereby lead to achievements that otherwise could not be attained (Smidt, 2003). Maton and Wells (1995) examined religion as a potential community resource through three avenues: primary prevention, healing, and group empowerment. Ninety percent of U.S. congregations have programs aimed at serving community needs (cited in Maton & Wells, 1995). There are certain preventive or protective factors associated with religion, such as a stronger emphasis on family and therefore greater stability for children during developmental years. Couples engaging in joint religious activities are found to have better marital functioning, perceive more personal benefits from marriage, and experience less marital conflict (Hansen, 1992; Mahoney et al., 1999). Also, “religion can contribute to the empowerment of disenfranchised groups, within or outside the congregation, by instilling a mobilizing vision and critical awareness anchored in socially-conscious religious principles (e.g., sanctity of all individuals; loving one’s neighbor as oneself)” [Maton & Wells, 1995, p. 186]. This ability of religion to empower can benefit an entire community by helping specific social groups to flourish and succeed in new ways. Religion has also been strongly correlated with other prosocial behaviors, such as decreased use of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs and may even be used successfully in treatment of substance abuse if so desired by the client (Benson, 1992; Burkett & White, 1974; Dudley, Mutch, & Cruise, 1987; Gorsuch, 1995; Gorsuch & Butler, 1976; Hadaway, Elifson, & Peterson, 1984; Middleton & Putney, 1962; Propst, 1988; Wuthnow, 1978).

The Dark Side of Religion and Spirituality

Given that both religion and mental health are complex, multidimensional constructs, some forms of religious commitment may be psychologically unhealthy in themselves while others may foster pathology and, indeed, the accumulating empirical evidence bears out that religion and spirituality are both positive and negative factors in predicting mental health (Bergin, 1994; Gartner, 1996; Miller & Kelley, 2005; Pargament & Park, 1995). That religion can be both healthy and unhealthy has long been recognized (James, 1902/1961) and though the balance of the following discussion may seem to indicate that religion and spirituality involve positive psychological dynamics, this is not always the case. For example, Gartner (1996) concludes that while a spiritual “moral net” may be personally beneficial and even necessary for societal structure, it may also snare one “who is progressing in a healthy autonomous

way along a path outside the boundaries of what is normally accepted” (p. 203). Clearly, various expressions of religion and spirituality that are characterized as more pathological or less healthy have been identified (Allport, 1950; Fromm, 1950; Hunt, 1972; Pargament, 1997). Religion and spirituality may provide resources for psychological coping as well as mechanisms that are associated with impaired mental health (for a more complete treatment of these, see Pargament et al., 1998). Not all religious and spiritual experiences are created equal.

Conclusion

We have maintained that religion and spirituality do not occur in a social vacuum but rather are influenced within a broader social context (i.e. cumulative religious traditions [Smith, 1962/1991]). Furthermore, religion and spirituality have been shown to be important predictors of physical and mental health as well as a provider of social capital. What is less clearly established is the extent to which there is a relationship between religion and the development of character strengths and virtues. We expect the relationship to be complex and we cannot say what might best predict whether or not a person is likely to develop a certain virtue. It could be whether the person is religious (or spiritual) or not, or which religion the person subscribes to, or how a person is oriented toward his or her religion. A beginning point is to better understand what is emphasized in various religious traditions that may have implications for the development of character strengths. It is to that issue that we now turn.

RELIGION AS A MEANS TO THE VIRTUE OF TRANSCENDENCE

For the sake of a thought-experiment, we will pose a hypothetical connection between four major religions and four personal characteristics that Peterson and Seligman (2004) categorize as character strengths of either justice (civic strengths that are foundational to life in community) or transcendence (the experience of a connection to the larger universe, or the non-physical world). While religious traditions are broad and complex, we seek to draw out only particular threads of each religion that could house potential relationships to a given character strength. Understanding how specific beliefs and teachings of religions contribute to the development of character strengths and virtues is not only a field ripe for study in itself, but one potentially useful to fuller and richer

conceptualizations for positive psychology. These cumulative traditions of faith are areas that should be systematically mined for insights into some of the mechanisms that contribute to the development of character strengths and virtues.

HINDUISM AND THE APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY AND EXCELLENCE

Appreciation of beauty and excellence (as well as the synonyms awe, wonder, and elevation), according to Peterson and Seligman (2004), “refers to the ability to find, recognize, and take pleasure in the existence of goodness in the physical and social worlds” (p. 537), thus allowing individuals to be elevated by their physical and social experiences to something beyond the physical or social world. The behavioral manifestations of this strength are often internal, and therefore harder to recognize. However, it is this internal experience, this ability to see in the physical world something that takes one beyond what is seen, which is a primary experience of Hinduism. Positive psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Dacher Keltner (Haidt, 2003; Keltner & Haidt, 2003) have introduced researchers to many of the unique insights offered by the Hindu religious tradition to the experience of awe. Keltner and Haidt (2003) propose two distinct themes of awe: (a) *vastness* or the experience of something far greater than the self, and (b) a Piagetian-like process of *accommodation* whereby mental structures that can no longer assimilate a new experience must be adjusted. Religions of all sorts incite these two components of awe when considering the majesty of the divine whether as some perceived form of supernatural (e.g., miracles) or natural (e.g., beautiful sunrises) manifestations. Indeed, even a century ago, James (1902/1961) spoke of a healthy-minded religion as one who emotionally responds to the world as a beautiful manifestation of divine character. However, Hinduism appears to speak with unusual emphasis on this character strength.

The Possible Relationship Between Hindu Beliefs and Appreciation of Beauty or Excellence

Despite significant variations between branches of Hinduism, common to virtually all religious Hindus is a belief “in a reality that transcends the mundane, empirical, or phenomenal world” (Puhakka, 1995, p. 123). To demonstrate its diversity, branches of Hinduism vary from each other to the extent that some are monotheistic and revere a

personal God while others are monistic and see divinity as pervading all reality. Thus, any description of Hinduism in terms of common features is likely simplistic and the best that can be done is to represent a significant portion of the broad religious tradition. We will explore a rudimentary understanding of (a) the hierarchy of the Hindu pantheon, (b) the creation myth, and (c) the idea of rebirth to understand how Hindu ritual, belief, sacred texts, religious myth and folklore may lend themselves to the development of appreciation of beauty and excellence (awe, wonder, and elevation).

Most branches of Hinduism are pantheistic, though not in the way pantheism is commonly understood. There are an infinite number of gods that are only *avatars* (manifestations) of the three primary manifestations of the one true Godhead: the *Vishnu* (that are actually all one), the *Trimutri*, (the three in one—sometimes called the Hindu trinity), and the *Brahman* (the Supreme Being). As pointed out in the Vishnu Purana (one of the medieval collections of laws, stories, and philosophy which reflects the teachings of older scriptures),

Just as light is diffused from a fire which is confined to one spot, so is the whole universe the diffused energy of the supreme Brahman. And as light shows a difference, greater or less, according to its nearness or distance from the fire, so there is a variation in the energy of the impersonal Brahman. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are his chief energies. The deities are inferior to them; the yakshas, etc., to the deities; men, cattle, wild animals, birds, and reptiles to the yakshas, etc.; and trees and plants are the lowest of all these energies... (Vishnu Purana 1.22)

Thus, the Brahman or Ultimate Reality appears in many forms by emanation throughout the created order. Yet such manifestations are phenomena of a world that is only temporary and partial and conceals total Truth.

Also significant to Hinduism is the creation myth. Hindu stories about the creation of the world vary, but certain themes and plot points are consistent. Brahman dreams the world into existence, and forgets to wake up. The existence of the world is maintained by forgetfulness, it is only an illusion. The individual's experience of the world is real, but the world, which they think they are experiencing as physical phenomena, is false (Puhakka, 1995).

Another explanation of a part of creation brings forth the same point. Purusha is the primordial sacrifice-Person; it is from him that the cosmic phenomena and the four human classes (which eventually become castes) are derived. He is another manifestation of Brahman,

and he is said to have projected himself onto the universe and the social system, as well as earthly phenomena. The Atma Upanishad (one of the ancient *Vedas*) says of him, “The supreme Self is neither born nor dies. He cannot be burned, moved, pierced, cut, nor dried. Beyond all attributes, the supreme Self is the eternal witness, ever pure, Indivisible...” (Atma Upanishad, n.d.; p. 242). “Three quarters of Purusha remain un-manifest during his sacrificial self-distribution; only one quarter becomes manifest in the created world. It is a way of saying that Purusha (Supreme Being, *Brahman*, the absolute) remains whole and undiminished by the act of creation, a way of expressing simultaneous transcendence and immanence of divinity. But it also says that this created world “doesn’t count” (Knipe, 1991, p. 40).

It is precisely this “immanence of divinity” that makes Hinduism a likely breeding ground for those strong in appreciation of beauty and excellence. The divine can be found in anything, because it is everything—nothing but the Brahman really exists. It is this doctrine, that the Brahman manifests himself through the many faces of gods and deities that disguise themselves, that can make any small encounter a potentially divine experience. Because Brahma is “in all creatures and is not different from the Ultimate Reality called God” (Juthani, 1998, p. 272), any experience of the material and created world is divine, and should inspire awe.

Keltner and Haidt (2003) summarize one of the earliest and most powerful examples of awe found in the Hindu *Bhagavadgita*. In one episode in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* (a foundational mythical text for Hinduism), the hero Arjuna is visited by Krishna (a form of the god Vishnu), and he asks Krishna if he can see the Universe. His request is granted, and she offers him a “cosmic eye” that allows him to see reality as it really is. “He is filled with amazement (*vismitas*). His hair stands on end. Disoriented, he struggles to describe the wonders he is beholding.” (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Arjuna is clearly in a state of awe when he says “I rejoice in seeing you as you have never been seen before, yet I am filled with fear by this vision of you as the abode of the universe. Please let me see you again as the shining God of gods. Though you are the embodiment of all creation, let me see you again...” (Bhagavadgita 11.45–47).

One of the primary goals of psychological research is to establish theoretical connections that can both describe and explain phenomena, and this is no less true for researchers interested in exploring religion as a means of creating character strength and virtues. This task is especially

important in the early stages of any new field of study. Haidt (2003) has begun this work by conceptualizing elevation in Hinduism as a third-dimension, purity versus pollution, or elevation versus degradation. This third dimension dictates certain behaviors so that God and those closest to God are not desecrated or defiled; the impure (low) is kept from contaminating the pure (high). Haidt points out that any understanding of Hindu ethics requires consideration of this vertical purity-pollution dimension. Hinduism places all creatures along this third dimension, and to the degree that they act like a god or a demon, they rise and fall on this scale. How one is reborn into the next life is determined by one's behavior in the previous life (how pure or impure one was). For Hindus, all evil actions draw one down, away from Brahman, and all experiences of elevation, both doing good deeds and witnessing others' good deeds and thinking on them, draws one upwards. Elevation can be thought of as feelings of moral improvement, which can come about by the sight or imagination of a virtuous act, and it is elevation in this sense (being drawn upwards) that is critical to the success of the Hindu in achieving oneness with Brahman.

Haidt's proposal of elevation as a third dimension helps to describe and explain the Hindu emphasis on experiences of awe and appreciation of beauty. Whether his idea is solely applicable to Hinduism or may be found in lesser degrees or other variations in other faith traditions remains to be tested. Whether Hindus are higher in this character strength than adherents to other religions, or even how particular sects of Hinduism relate to other sects with different beliefs in terms of this character strength, are also questions worth asking. Hypothetically, however, Hindu beliefs could be a means of developing appreciation of beauty and excellence, elevation, awe, and wonder in the person; one step on the road to developing the virtue of transcendence.

JUDAISM AND CITIZENSHIP (SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, LOYALTY, TEAMWORK)

Unlike the other connections between religion and character strengths of transcendence, positive psychology's point of contact with Judaism is perhaps stronger with what Peterson and Seligman (2004) categorized as character strengths of justice, which they see as "broadly interpersonal, relevant to the optimal interaction between the individual and the group or community" (p. 357). Peterson and Seligman proposed

that strengths of justice be considered as strengths *among* whereas other character strengths be considered as strengths *between*. This suggests that the consideration of virtues should also include a collective focus. Though citizenship implies a legal status, it also represents a “feeling of identification with and sense of obligation to a common good that includes the self but that stretches beyond one’s own self-interest” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 370). Hence, such characteristics as a sense of duty, a working for the common good rather than just individual gain, and a sense of loyalty or commitment to one’s collective identity epitomize this character strength, and characterize the Jewish actualization of justice.

Judaism places a fundamental emphasis on religious practice and the regulation of community life according to the Torah or Law (the first five books of the Bible, but also commonly used to refer to all Jewish teachings and practices). The Hebrew Bible as a “national book of memories” (Fishbane, 1993, p. 394) has collectively served the Jewish people from “generation to generation, providing them with self-definition and historical consciousness as well as with rules governing divine-human and interpersonal relations” (Fishbane, 1993, p. 394). Indeed, what is preserved in the Torah is the description of a covenantal relationship based on the divine instructions Moses received at Mount Sinai. Though having undergone significant change and development, Judaism is nevertheless a historical religion and, therefore, God is not abstract or impersonal. As with any relationship, each party is obligated to uphold its responsibilities and, for the Jew, an active religious life is “not one of theory and deduction, but one entirely filled with ritual and moral obligations, constantly making the reality of God present in the most personal and concrete terms” (Fishbane, 1993, p. 397).

The Possible Relationship between Judaism and Citizenship

Life’s highest standard is derived from the character of deity. Of the many attributes of God described in the Hebrew Bible, probably none are more poignant and incisive than the notion of God as a just God. Divine justice is fundamentally premised as a commutative justice, “a measure for a measure” (Cohn, 1987, p. 515); God rewards those who obey him and punishes those who defy him (Deut. 7:9–10) because only a sovereign and omniscient God ultimately knows what is good. Indeed, for the Jew, God’s justice is an assurance that a sovereign and almighty God will not misuse omnipotence against the created order, as

pagan God's were believed to do (Moore, 1971). As Job (37:23) points out, God does no violence to justice and, thus, recorded deviations from such divine justice, such as threats of unbridled divine revenge or wrath (e.g., Ex. 22:24; Lev. 26–21–39), were believed necessary for purposes of deterrence.

Such commutative justice that—God renders to every one according to his or her deeds (Ps. 62:13)—could become a criterion for human justice only if understood in the complete context of the character of God, for God is not only a God of justice but also of mercy (Cohn, 1987). The Jewish God appears willing to accommodate the special needs of those less privileged who are most vulnerable to oppression: the poor, widows, orphans, those disabled, etc. As Cohn (1987) pointed out, “Not only does this preferment of the underprivileged not derogate from justice, it is one of its most important and characteristic elements; in addition, it demonstrates that justice and equality are not necessarily coextensive” (p. 517). It may also explain why the Torah specifically prohibits vengeance or carrying a grudge as a proper motivation (Lev. 19:18).

Still, justice is an important norm in that it helps regulate behavior for fair interactions that are not only mutually beneficial, but are good for society. Folger and Cropanzano (1998) points out that it is our sense of justice that provides a sense of predictability in human relationships and makes us aware of the boundaries of acceptable behavior. It also instills confidence that future outcomes will be equitably distributed (*distributive justice*), that the procedures for allocating resources are perceived to be fair (*procedural justice*), and that the distribution of resources and procedures will be communicated with a priority placed on respect and dignity (*interactional justice*). When these norms are violated, an *injustice gap* (Worthington, 2006) is created, the size and importance of which are determined by a number of factors including the severity of an offense, the intention behind the offense, and whether the victim was deserving or not (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003; Hill, Exline, & Cohen, 2005).

For the Jew, citizenship necessarily involves concerns for justice. Suggesting that a just God is indeed an imitable God, since humans were created in God's image, Jewish law is structured to foster a sense of loyalty and social responsibility with a primary concern for justice. Indeed, following God's law prevents injustice gaps; it is the violation of such laws that leads to the need to respond to injustice, and to do so properly is yet another indication of citizenship as a developed character strength.

Perhaps central to the concern for justice as a basis for citizenship is the willingness of the individual to forego immediate self-concerns and gratifications for the longer term interests of the group (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), thus displaying such personal character strengths as empathy (Batson, 1990) and a priority placed on loyalty and trustworthiness as a basis for moral reasoning (Higgins, Power, & Kohlberg, 1984). In this sense, citizenship can be considered a character strength of transcendence since its concerns run contrary to an orientation that stresses self-enhancement. That such individuals exist in sufficiently common numbers has been empirically validated (Dawes, van de Kragt, & Orbell, 1990), though it is a character strength likely better fostered in some cultures and social contexts than others.

Dawes et al. (1990) review a substantial literature suggesting that a strong social bond or sense of solidarity are more likely to manifest such character strengths as loyalty and obligation. Perhaps no organized religious tradition has a more developed sense of solidarity than Judaism, particularly through the biblical concept of being a “treasured possession among all peoples” (Ex. 19:5). This notion of being a *chosen people*, an election of a people by its god, does not imply superiority or inherent sanctity (though it does hint at *specialness*) as much as it stresses duties and responsibilities as part of a conditional choosing (Atlan, 1987).

As with all religious traditions and teachings, however, one must be on guard against misunderstandings and abuses. In the case of Judaism, citizenship is defined at birth (i.e., to be a Jew, one must be born of a Jewish mother) and access to the group by others is impossible, enhancing the possibility of in-group favoritism and out-group hostilities. To guard against such natural tendencies, Judaism stresses that the imitation of God yields an ethic based on compassion that knows no ethnic or religious boundaries. “As the omnipotent Creator sustains his creation in grace and loving-kindness, so we—with our mortal strength—are to emulate him and to do acts of grace and loving-kindness for those who may be disadvantaged...” (Harvey, 1987, p. 300). It is such justice, born of both strength and compassion and rooted in the moral imitation of God, which serves as the Jewish prescription for “the optimal interaction between the individual and the group or community” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 357).

The sense of solidarity experienced by Jews in their historical tradition of being a people set apart, has given rise to insulated orthodox Jewish communities in cultures where Judaism is otherwise not a major force (such as in America). These orthodox communities offer researchers

the opportunity to test the degree to which sociocultural values such as citizenship and justice are successfully transmitted without the “secularized” influence of the larger culture.

CHRISTIANITY AND HOPE (OPTIMISM, FUTURE-MINDEDNESS, FUTURE ORIENTATION)

Peterson and Seligman (2004) define hope, optimism, future-mindedness and future orientation as

...a cognitive, emotional, and motivational stance toward the future. Thinking about the future, expecting that desired events and outcomes will occur, acting in ways believed to make them more likely, and feeling confident that these will ensue given appropriate efforts sustain good cheer in the here and now and galvanize goal-directed actions. (p. 570)

They go on to highlight nuances between hope and its synonyms, such that *hope* is more affect-oriented, and *optimism* more closely involves the role of expectations. *Future-mindedness* and *future orientation* are focused on articulating a theory of how to get from one place in the present to a (desired) place in the future. Hope has historically referred to positive expectations about “matters that have a reasonable likelihood of coming to pass” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 751), and has a long history in the Judeo-Christian tradition as one of the chief virtues.

As indicated earlier in this article, optimism has been clearly linked with physical (Seligman, 1992; Visintainer, Volpicelli, & Seligman, 1982) and mental health benefits (Peterson, 2000). Some (e.g., Peterson, 2000; Tiger, 1995) have suggested that religion is linked to optimism because of the hope that it holds and the certainty with which it speaks. McClure and Loden (1982) found that more time spent in religious activity correlated with more overall satisfaction and happiness with life. Sethi and Seligman (1993) found in their study that members of fundamentalist religious groups were more optimistic than those in more moderate or liberal religions. Smith and Gorsuch (1989) discovered that religious conservatives use an underlying attributional logic that encourages optimism: a powerful personal God is viewed as an interested and active agent in everyday life events, but especially those that are positive in nature. They further discovered that religious conservatives view God as active through multiple channels (God may speak by various means) and as working collaboratively with humans, thus contributing to one’s sense of meaning and purpose. The work by Smith and Gorsuch serves

as but another example of the potential to describe and explain some phenomenon occurring in religious and positive psychological development (in this case, the optimism of religious conservatives).

Christianity is a religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus was an Israelite Jew who taught that he was the Son of God, thereby claiming a divine nature for himself. As recorded in the New Testament of the Bible, he was born, lived and taught, was crucified and buried; on the third day he is said to have risen again and to have ascended bodily into Heaven. Many Christians place a great deal of weight on Jesus' resurrection. They reason that because Jesus predicted his own death and resurrection, if he did not rise from the dead then he was a liar and his teachings are not true. Paul says in a letter to the Christians in Corinth that, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins... If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:17 & 19). In fact, hope is identified as one of the "Big Three" Christian theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity) that "provides respite during trials, brings perseverance during challenges, and provides assurance of eternal joy" (Emmons, 2005, p. 242).

The Possible Relationship between Christianity and Hope

The New Testament account of Jesus' teachings and the writings of Paul the Apostle emphasize not only the judgment of God, but also the salvific role of Jesus as the means to secure favor before God in said judgment. It is faith in the ability of Jesus to mediate between God and the human being that is the basis for belief in Christian doctrine.

The relationship between the teachings of Christianity and the character strengths of hope and optimism is evident in the Nicene Creed, a brief but densely packed summary of foundational Christian doctrine, which says of Jesus that, "...He shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead..." (BCP, 1945). And so it is that in two important ways Christianity both requires hope as a part of the salvation process and produces hope as a byproduct of belief. Hope in the ability of Jesus to intercede for humankind before a righteous and judging God is a necessary part of the salvation process for Christians, perhaps even the central point of it. Once salvation or conversion has taken place, hope in an eternal heavenly bliss in the presence of God as well as the return of Jesus to establish an earthly kingdom (viewed

differentially among Christians as either literal or symbolic) is an important byproduct of belief in Christ's teachings.

Future-mindedness and *future orientation* require an articulation of how to move from one place in the present to a (desired) place in the future. Christianity attempts to move humankind from a place of separation from God to a place of communion with God. Psychological research on hope by Snyder and colleagues (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Snyder, 1994; Snyder, Sigmon, & Feldman, 2002) suggests that hope be conceptualized in terms of the ability to think of goals, to perceive pathways related to those goals, and to believe one is capable of achieving those goals. If, indeed, the Christian hope is for closeness and communion with God, then Christian precepts not only articulate pathways to achieve such a blessed hope, but also exhort believers to "hold unswervingly to the hope professed" (Heb. 10:23). It is the believer's confidence in the ability of Jesus to reconcile humanity and God, the veracity of Christ's resurrection, and the expectation of Christ's return and ensuing afterlife which help shape the Christian devotional life. Together, these beliefs suggest that Christian tenets help foster a sense of hope and optimism. Snyder's model, already useful in uncovering hope as a mediator between religious involvement and health (Snyder et al., 2002), provides researchers with a specific theoretical framework by which to empirically test the relationship between Christian teaching and the construct of hope.

ISLAM AND SPIRITUALITY (RELIGIOUSNESS, FAITH, PURPOSE)

"*Spirituality* and *religiousness* refer to beliefs and practices that are grounded in the conviction that there is a transcendent (nonphysical) dimension of life. These beliefs are persuasive, pervasive and stable" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 600). Much of the research on spirituality and religiousness to date has focused on correlates of religious involvement, which have already been addressed. The correlation of religious involvement and pro-social or self-protective behavior has been well established in the literature (e.g., Mattis et al., 2000).

However, the character strength of spirituality goes beyond mere behavior to include other components, including affect. Research about the rituals of secular and religious Jews in Israel revealed that while participation in these rituals renders these groups indistinguishable, their experience of and motivation for participation in them can vary

dramatically (Lazar, Kravetz, & Frederich-Kedem, 2002). Peterson and Seligman (2004) write that, “People with this strength have a theory about the ultimate meaning of life that shapes their conduct and provides comfort to them. Furthermore, spirituality and religiousness are linked to an interest in moral values and the pursuit of goodness” (p. 533). Spirituality can thus be condensed into several component parts: belief, behavior and affect, and all of these with a moral flavor. This paper presupposes that the character strength of spirituality will most strongly take root when any religion or system of beliefs touches all three component parts, and the more direct the contact the stronger the likelihood that spirituality (religiousness, faith, and purpose) will appear. While all religions have a theological or divine-belief component with implications for behavior and affect, spirituality will flourish when a religion not only implies behavior but dictates it, and not only supposes affective reactions of a certain kind but systematically instills them. This presupposition regarding the relationship of belief, behavior, and affect for the development of spirituality is another example of research questions that can be addressed by positive psychology researchers.

The Possible Relationship Between Islam and Spirituality

Islam is a monotheistic religion that teaches belief in one God who is “creator, sustainer, ruler and judge of the universe” (Esposito, 2002, p. 4) and is a religion which descends directly from the Judeo-Christian traditions that had been established earlier. “Unlike other monotheistic religions, Islam, at its core, makes no distinction between the spiritual and the temporal. It is at one and the same time a set of religious beliefs and dogmas as well as a pattern of behavior designed to order the relations between man and man and between man and the state” (Moughrabi, 1995, p. 72).

Islam began with the prophet Muhammed in 610 A.D. when he is reported to have been visited by the archangel Gabriel and commanded to read from a silk scroll (Armstrong, 1993; Gordon, 2002). After finishing, he was commanded by Gabriel to be a prophet, and convey the messages from the scroll to the people. These messages were eventually written down in what is now called the Qur’an, and are taken to be the words of Allah, the God of Islam. In 622 A.D., Mohammed moved his people to Medina, and many Muslims mark this as the beginning of the Islamic era (Armstrong, 1993; Gordon, 2002).

Islam, like Judaism, emphasizes *acting out* basic beliefs, more specifically the five pillars of Islam (witness of the creed, worship/prayer, almsgiving, fasting during Ramadan, and a pilgrimage to Mecca) (Qur'an, n.d., trans. 2004). However, there are three distinctives of Islam that make this religion likely to be unusually capable of creating a strongly committed spirituality and religiousness in its adherents. Islam's inclusiveness of other religions, the breadth of the behavioral mandates in the Qur'an, and the sociopolitical, linguistic, and even architectural transmission of religion through culture all foster an unusual sense of the transcendent dimension of life.

Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last messenger sent by Allah. However, unlike other religions, which believe in prophets to the exclusion of other faith-traditions, Islam "requires its followers to believe that all the great religions of the world that preceded it have been revealed by God" (Muhammad Ali, 1990, p. 5). For example, the Qur'an says that, "Say: We believe in Allah and (in) that which has been revealed to us, and (in) that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and (in) that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and (in) that which was given to the prophets from their Lord; we do not make any distinction between any of them" (2:136). Other Muslim writers affirm Islam's acceptance of previous religious systems based on the changeless nature of human needs, which all religions seek to satisfy (Abdalati, 1993). Islam, according to its followers, is the last and all-inclusive religion. It is this inclusion, in contrast to the exclusion of outside religions by other faith-communities, which endows Islam with a foundational power to make meaning of all other experiences. This inclusion gives Islam tremendous explanatory power, and is a cognitively simpler task than that of other religions (which affirm some, but not all tenets of other faiths), perhaps making it easier to sustain across the lifespan. This shapes the belief of Muslims that Allah's will can be expressed in all things, and is one example of the pervasive belief component mentioned in Peterson and Seligman's definition of spirituality and religion.

As stated previously, all religions satisfy the belief component, and these beliefs inevitably have implications for behavior. The religion of Islam, however, leaves the believer with not only implications, but mandates from the Qur'an. The holy book, which is taken to be the words of Allah passed through the prophet Muhammad, instructs adherents not only in the five pillars,

but also, and in richer detail, with the problems of the world around us, with questions pertaining to relations between man and man, his social and political life, institutions of marriage, divorce and inheritance, division of wealth and relations of labor and capital, administration of justice, military organization, peace and war, national finances, debts and contracts, rules for the service of humanity and even treatment of animals, laws for the help of the poor, the orphan and the widow, and hundreds of other questions the proper understanding of which enables man to lead a happy life (Muhammad Ali, 1990, p. 6).

The Qur'an dictates behavior for most spheres of life, leaving little question of how to act out beliefs. The breadth of topics discussed in the Qur'an means that there is little that Islam does not directly touch—and these explicit points of contact mean that there is little in the lives of Muslims that is not clearly “religious” in the strict sense of the word. The requirements of Islam have a moral taste, but so do their economic policy, their voting patterns, and their family interaction. Even a topical survey of the Qur'an will reveal the spiritual and religious nature of most behavior in the Muslim life, and this clearly satisfies the behavioral component of the definition of spirituality as a character strength: behavior with a moral character that is rooted in a conviction about a transcendent or non-physical reality.

This paper claimed earlier that when a religion not only supposes affective reactions of a certain kind but systematically instills them, the character strength of spirituality is likely to follow on its heels. Islam interweaves sociopolitical, linguistic, and architectural culture with religion, with the affective result of personal identity with Islam at its core. As is common in Eastern civilizations, communitarian thought locates the self primarily in the context of the collective community, or culture. Islam is synonymous with culture, and it is this that allows it to affectively identify the self for believers.

The political concept of the caliphate comes from the Arabic root *Kh-l-f*, which means to be a successor, and the word *caliph* refers to the successors of the Prophet. The caliphate combines both religious and secular power, which comes as no surprise since the successors of the prophet are supposed to follow in the footsteps of a man who was a religious, military, political and cultural leader. Historically, the separation of church and state, prized so highly in the West, is unknown within Islam. There is a sense in which political rulers are divinely appointed, manifesting the will of Allah, and this places even politics in a sacred and religious light.

Some knowledge of Arabic is crucial to a true understanding of Islam. “The sacred book of Islam, the Qur’an, ceases to exist when its words are translated into another tongue...” (Fry & King, 1980). Although the Arabic of the Qur’an differs from the colloquial Arabic spoken by most Middle-Easterners, it is a language that embodies the faith of a people, as well as functioning as an expression of the faith. It is common in some places to end sentences using future tense verbs with the phrase “if Allah wills,” another example of the way Islamic religious beliefs touch even casual speech.

Mosques are a central feature of the expression of Islamic faith, a place of worship that is the focal point of every Muslim city. A geographical scan of the map for most Muslim cities reveals that all roads lead to the Mosque, “and that not only is there a central mosque, but that each section—quarter of a city—has its own small version—sometimes very plain, sometimes very elaborate” (Fry & King, 1980, p. 10). The mosque, a religious building by nature, is also the place of community life, a symbolic fact indicating that religion touches and motivates all things: children are instructed there, students study inside, communities gather on summer evenings, public announcements are made there and much more (Muhammad Ali, 1990). The mosque is a symbol of Islam, but is also a center for community life—the two are inextricably linked both physically and symbolically.

Political figures with religious influence, as well as linguistic structures and architecture, all serve to instill a deep identity within the Islamic people—that Islam is not just a religion, but is a way of life. All things are religious and, therefore, one’s complete existence is interpreted in the context of a religious world. Children are thoroughly immersed by way of teaching (belief), modeling (behavior), and cultural infusion (affective identification), thus making Islam unusually capable at creating and sustaining the character strength of religiousness or spirituality.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the bulk of our treatment of the relationship between religion and character strengths has been centered on specific tenets of four cumulative religious traditions, we have mentioned throughout various other ways in which religion may be related to the development of virtues such as transcendence and justice. As the relationship between religion and positive psychology is still just budding, we find several

broad areas or tasks to be of high importance in furthering its development. Specifically, creating theoretical models that describe and explain the role of religious teachings, practices, and other unique sociocultural influences in the creation and sustenance of character strengths and virtues is particularly valuable. Theoretical work by Haidt (2003) and Snyder (Snyder et al., 2002) serve as good exemplars. The extent to which these models apply only within specific religious traditions versus their universality across religious traditions. The development of theoretical models that can account for the multiplicity of factors both within and across cumulative religious traditions will also be crucial.

Research in comparative religious studies that focuses on analyzing positive psychological virtues is also likely to bear much fruit in the future. Are some virtues or character strengths conspicuously absent in some religious traditions? Do some religious traditions stress certain virtues or strengths at the expense of others? For example, does Christianity's emphasis on forgiveness from God and for others result in making justice a merely symbolic construct that is located within the person of Christ (whose sacrifice satiates the justice of God)? Do the emphases in Islam on religiosity and the obligation to act out of the five pillars of faith downplay the importance of affective components of faith?

Commonalities among religious teachings and practices across cultures and across time will also be useful in understanding the underlying mechanisms of religion for producing human flourishing. While it is certainly a possibility that some religions or traditions are better at producing some virtue or strength than others, and may do so in a unique way that other religions cannot emulate, it is also likely that religions share some common methods or beliefs. A systematic analysis of the religious literature and cultural artifacts will be beneficial in this pursuit.

The study of non-religious persons and their development of virtues will also prove fruitful for researchers. How do they ascribe value to certain virtues and moral stances? Is it similar to those in practicing religious traditions? Positive psychology could also undertake the study of spiritual transformation (Hill, 2002), including that of individuals who have converted either from no religion or from one religion to another. Is there a change in their character? Where in the personality are these changes situated? Although this last question is intriguing, caution to researchers to specify type of personality change and type

of religious conversion should be well heeded (Paloutzian, Richardson & Rambo, 1999).

The question of human flourishing is one that readily applies to all people, and thus our pursuit to understand it ought to incorporate interdisciplinary effort (including such disciplines as anthropology, history, literature) resulting in multiple levels of explanation. To this end we propose that collaboration between religious scholars, psychologists of religion, and positive psychology researchers is necessary to systematically probe the insights of religious traditions to better understand human flourishing.

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