Religion as a Quest for Meaning

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The universal human need for meaning is a widely accepted notion. This need is generally described as a drive to understand one’s experience and to feel that one’s life has significance and purpose. In a slight reformulation, Park, Edmondson, and Hale-Smith (in press) recently asserted that this need is better understood as the need for a functional meaning system that can meet the meaning-related needs for significance, comprehension, and transcendence. A host of more specific meaning-related needs have been identified, including agency (Gray & Wegner, 2010), control (Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010), certainty (Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010), identity (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010), social validation, (Park Pargament chapter), values, (Baumeister, 1991), and the need to cope with trauma and awareness of our own mortality (Vail et al., 2010).

Although people have many options for meeting these needs for understanding, significance, and transcendence, religion is one of the most common and powerful sources of meaning, present throughout history and thriving in the 21st Century. This chapter conceptualizes religion as a pervasive influence on the beliefs, goals, values, and subjective sense of fulfillment that, together, form global meaning and describes the many ways that religion is often drawn upon to meet the pressing need for a functional meaning system. The chapter begins with explication of a theoretical model of meaning in both daily life and in times of crisis, and then presents conceptual and empirical support for the roles that religion can play in providing meaning in these contexts. The chapter concludes with remaining questions regarding religion as a source of meaning.

The Meaning Making Model
Developed to integrate the various predominant strands of theory and research on meaning, the meaning making model posits that there are two important aspects of meaning, global and situational meaning (Park, 2010; see Figure 1). Global meaning is an overarching framework of beliefs, goals, and sense of purpose; through this framework, people structure their lives and assign meanings to specific experiences (situational meaning). Global meaning comprises three aspects—beliefs, goals, and feelings (Park & Folkman, 1997). Global beliefs are broad assumptions that people make regarding their own nature as well as their understanding of other people and the universe (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Global goals refer to people’s motivation/purpose for living, choice of goals, standards for judging behavior, and basis for self-esteem. Global goals are high-level ideals, states, or objects towards which people work or seek to maintain (Karoly, 1999; Klinger, 1998). The affective aspect of global meaning refers to the subjective experience of a sense of meaning or purpose in life (Reker & Wong, 1988; Steger, 2009), which may be derived, in part, from seeing one’s actions as oriented or making progress towards a desired future goal (McGregor & Little, 1998; Steger, 2009).

Global meaning influences individuals’ interpretations of both ordinary encounters and highly stressful events. In the course of everyday life, global meaning informs individuals’ understanding of themselves and their lives and directs their personal projects and, through them, their general sense of well-being and life satisfaction (e.g., Emmons, 1999). Further, when individuals encounter potentially stressful or traumatic events, they assign a meaning to them. Appraised meanings are compared with global meaning, and stress or trauma is experienced when appraised meanings “shatter” or violate aspects of one’s global meaning system (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Koss & Figueredo, 2004). For example, learning that a close friend was struck and killed by a drunk driver may violate one’s global beliefs that the world is fair or predictable.
Global goals are violated when an event is appraised as discrepant with what one wants. The death of one’s friend violates the goal of having that friendship intact.

Determining that an appraised event violates one’s global meaning can lead to a loss of a sense of control or that the word is comprehensible, creating distress. The meaning making model posits that the level of distress experienced is predicated on the extent of discrepancy between one’s global beliefs and goals and one’s appraised situational meaning of the event (Park & Folkman, 1997; Park, 2008). Distress, in turn, initiates a search for restoration of coherence among aspects of global meaning and the appraised meaning assigned to the event (Park, Edmondson, & Mills, 2010).

These attempts to restore global meaning following its disruption or violation is termed meaning making. Meaning making involves coming to see or understand a situation in a different way and reconsidering one’s beliefs and goals in order to regain consistency among them (Davis et al., 2000). When appraised meaning of an event is discrepant with their global meaning, people typically attempt to change or distort their views of events to incorporate them into their global meaning (i.e., assimilation). However, people may also change their global meaning to incorporate events (i.e., accommodation). Meaning-making reduces the sense of discrepancy between appraised and global meanings and restores a sense that the world is comprehensible and that their own lives are worthwhile.

Meaning making is generally considered adaptive to the extent that satisfactory meanings are produced (Harper et al., 2007; Michael & Snyder, 2005), but continued efforts to reduce discrepancies between situational and global meaning can segue into rumination, intrusive thoughts, and long-term distress (Gray, Maguen, & Litz, 2007; Park, 2010). Many outcomes, or meanings made, can result from meaning making, including changes made in one’s appraisal of
stressful event (e.g., viewing it as less damaging or, perhaps, even fortuitous), changes made in
one’s global meaning (e.g., viewing the world as less controllable), and stress-related growth
(e.g., experiencing increased appreciation for life, stronger connections with family and friends,
or greater self-awareness of one’s strengths).

**Religion and Global Meaning in Ordinary Circumstances**

Scientists have developed many different ways to define religiousness, and there is little
consensus on a specific definition, although there is agreement that religiousness has many
different dimensions (e.g., denominational affiliation, beliefs, behaviors such as prayer or
meditation, social involvement, service attendance, etc; Fetzer/NIA, 1999). Zinnbauer and
Pargament (2005) proposed a general working definition of religiousness as *a search for
significance in ways related to the sacred* (p. 36). This definition suggests the close link between
religiousness and meaning.

Worldwide, about 85% of people report having some form of religious belief, with only
15% describing themselves as atheist, agnostic, or nonreligious (Zuckerman, 2005). In the
United States, the vast majority of Americans attend religious services at least once a month,
pray at least once a day, state that religion is a very important part of their lives, and believe in
heaven, hell, angels, demons, and miracles (e.g., U. S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008; see
Slattery & Park, in press). Yet although research in the psychology of religion has proceeded
apace over the past decades (Paloutzian & Park, in press), many researchers tend to overlook,
minimize, or altogether ignore this influence on human behavior, whether out of bias or
ignorance (Pargament, in press-a). This inattention to the high levels of religious interest and
behavior in the lives of most people by many mainstream lines of research is unfortunate,
creating an incomplete understanding of human nature.
The need to acknowledge and understand religious influences is important in many areas of human life, but perhaps nowhere more relevant than in issues of meaning (Batson & Stocks, 2004). Religious meaning systems appear well-suited to provide global meaning. For example, Hood and colleagues (Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005) identified four criteria by which religion is uniquely capable of providing global meaning: comprehensiveness, accessibility, transcendence, and direct claims. Comprehensiveness refers to the vast scope of issues which religion can subsume, including beliefs about the world (e.g., human nature, social and natural environment, the afterlife), contingencies and expectations (rewards for righteousness and punishment for doing evil), goals (e.g., benevolence, altruism, supremacy), actions (e.g., compassion, charity, violence) and emotions (e.g., love, joy, peace) (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009; Silberman, 2005). Religion is accessible in that it is widely promoted and comes in many forms, so that people can usually find a way of being religious or spiritual that suits them (Hood et al., 2005). Religions provide opportunities for transcending their own concerns or experience and connecting with something greater. Finally, religions make bold and authoritative claims regarding their ability to provide a sense of significance. All of these characteristics lead to the unmatched ability of religion to serve as the source of global meaning systems (Hood et al., 2009). Religion can provide individuals with comprehensive and integrated frameworks of meaning that are able to explain many worldly events, experiences, and situations in highly satisfactory ways (Spilka et al., 2003). Religious meaning systems provide ways to understand mundane, day-to-day occurrences as well as extraordinary ones (Park, 2005).

Religion and Global Beliefs

When religion is incorporated into people’s global meaning systems, their understanding of God or of the divine (e.g., as loving and benevolent, wrathful, or distant) will inform their
beliefs about the nature of people (e.g., inherent goodness, made in God’s image, sinful human nature), this world (e.g., the coming apocalypse, the illusory nature of reality) as well as, perhaps, the next (e.g., Heaven, reincarnation) (McIntosh, 1995; Silberman, 2005).

Religion is the core for many individuals’ identities in terms of how they understand themselves as a religious or spiritual being (e.g., as unworthy of God, as chosen; Pargament, 1997; Slattery & Park, in press) as well as their social identification with a religious group (Ysseyldyk et al., 2010). Religious identity can also provide a source of self-esteem and moral superiority (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010).

Religion can strongly influence beliefs about control (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982; Young & Morris, 2004). Some forms of religiousness exhort believers to take explicit action over what they can or to work closely with God as partners (Pargament, 1997), while other religious traditions explicitly encourage a surrender of control and a handing over of control to powerful others, which can be seen as a form of secondary control (Exline, 2002). In research that manipulated participants’ sense of personal control, greater belief in a God who has control over events was reported by those whose sense of personal control was undermined (Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010), suggesting that religion serves a compensatory control function.

Individuals’ understanding regarding human suffering, termed theodicies, is strongly informed by their religious beliefs (Hall & Johnson, 2001). Hall and Johnson (2001) discussed how individuals can hold only two of the following three propositions simultaneously: God is all-powerful, God is all good, and evil exists. They note that people struggle to find some way to believe that these three statements are not logically incompatible or defend the plausibility of God’s existence in the light of these seemingly contradictory propositions. Such struggle to make
meaning or hold onto one’s beliefs in a powerful and loving God when one has personally experienced evil or severe negative trauma can be great (Pargament, 1997; Kushner, 1982).

A variety of solutions to this dilemma lead to a variety of theodicy beliefs. Hall and Johnson (2001) note that one influential Christian viewpoint holds that goodness can occur only in a world where evil also exists, particularly those virtues that an individual comes to practice only through suffering because of evil, such as patience, mercy, forgiveness, endurance, faith, courage, and compassion (Hall & Johnson, 2001). In this meaning system, one can come to see one’s traumatic or stressful experience as an opportunity to grow through one’s suffering (e.g., to build one’s soul, to become more Christ-like, to grow in agape love; Hall & Johnson, 2001). Another solution may be to view suffering as necessary for reaching future events, such as the ultimate goal of salvation (Baumeister, 1991).

Although religiousness and spirituality have generally been found to influence global beliefs in positive ways, religious beliefs can be negative in their content or influence on the believer as well. For example, negative religious cognitions, such as religious extremism have been implicated in terrorism (see Kruglanski, Chapter xx, this volume) and beliefs about an angry, uncaring or punitive God can have powerfully destructive implications for personal and social functioning (see Exline & Rose, in press). In terms of influences on the believer, some research has suggested that although a sense of secondary control is often helpful, it also poses the risk of religious fatalism, by which people may abdicate responsibility to take direct actions to alleviate problems (e.g., Franklin, Schlundt, & Wallston, 2008; Norenzayan, & Lee, 2010).

**Religion and Global Goals**

Religion is central to the life purposes of many people, providing their ultimate motivation and primary goals for living as well as prescriptions and guidelines for achieving
those goals (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Pargament, 1997). Ultimate goals can include connecting or adhering to the sacred; living a life full of benevolence, forgiveness, or altruism; achieving enlightenment; finding salvation; knowing God; or experiencing the transcendent (Emmons, 1999; Pargament, Magyar-Russell, & Murray-Swank, 2005). Other goals can be derived from these superordinate ones, such as having peace of mind, working for peace and justice in the world, devoting oneself to one’s family, or creating a strong sense of community with other believers. Of course, it must be noted, people often embrace negative goals, such as supremacy and destruction, in the name of religion as well (Stern, 2003; Kruglanski, Chapter xx, this volume). While some goals are explicitly religious or spiritual, each and every goal that an individual holds may become connected to the sacred through the process of sanctification (e.g., Mahoney et al., 2005). Sanctification involves assigning spiritual significance and character to secular objects (Mahoney et al., 1999). Therefore, any goal can take on religious value if the individual ties it to his or her conceptualization of the sacred (Pargament et al., 2005).

Related to goals are values, broad preferences about the worth of ultimate goals and the appropriate courses of action to achieve those goals. Values are the guidelines that individuals use to determine worth, importance, or correctness (Roccas, 2005) and reflect a person’s sense of right and wrong. Values guide decision-making regarding one’s behavior in the course of achieving goals. Religion is an extremely potent source of values for individuals as well as for entire cultures, supplying a framework for determining what is right and good and to be pursued, and what is wrong and bad and to be avoided (Baumeister, 1991). Religions are in an unusually esteemed position to be able to determine or establish these criteria of right and wrong and good and bad; they may, in fact, be the most powerful source of values in many cultures (Baumeister, 1991).
Religious motivations can be quite revealing regarding global meaning—what religious ends do people pursue, and by what means? Are people drawn to engage in religion as a rewarding endeavor or driven to engage in it out of fear (Jackson & Francis, 2004)? Most of the research on this topic has used some variant of the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction originally proposed by Gordon Allport (1966), in which intrinsic religiousness refers to motivation to be religious for its own sake, while extrinsic religiousness refers to being religious as a way to gain other ends such as comfort or social standing. This distinction has been useful in understanding religious motivation (Francis, Christopher, & Robbins, 2010) but has also proven to be too simplistic (Kirkpatrick & Hood, 1990). For example, people often have both intrinsic and extrinsic motives for their religious behaviors, and can be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated for many different religious ends.

Global goals are pursued through a variety of lower level, more concrete goals. Personal strivings refer to the recurrent or ongoing goals that a person characteristically tries to attain or maintain. According to Emmons (2005), spiritual strivings refer to goals that involve self-transcendence and that concern ultimate questions of meaning and existence. Prototypic of these types of strivings are those that reflect knowing and serving God. However, in addition to these explicitly religious motives, people can imbue virtually any personal striving as having spiritual significance and character (Mahoney et al., 2005).

**Religion and the Subjective Sense of Meaning in Life**

While religion and meaning in life may seem obviously linked, surprisingly few studies have specifically documented these links, and most of the research has examined bivariate relations of fairly simple measures of both religion and sense of purpose. Results of these studies indicate that religiousness is related to a sense of meaning in life (e.g., Tomer & Eliason, 2000).
For example, a series of studies among college students examining dimensions of religiousness and meaning in life yielded consistent correlations of moderate strength (Steger & Frazier, 2005).

Relations between religiousness and meaning may be moderated by demographic factors. Religiousness appears to be more strongly related to a sense of life meaning in the elderly (Ardelt, 2003; Krause, 2008) and for older Black adults as compared to older White adults (Krause, 2008). Further, different aspects of religiousness and spirituality may be differentially related to a sense of meaning in life. Intrinsic religiousness has been found to be more strongly positively related to meaning in life than extrinsic religiousness in studies of both undergraduates (Francis & Hills, 2008; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) and community-dwelling elders (Ardelt, 2003).

Recent research suggests that the connections between religiousness/spirituality and a sense of meaning in life may be even more complex in that religiousness may change the very basis of meaning in life, by shifting people’s focus away from hedonic concerns about the pursuit of pleasure toward eudemonic concerns about living according to one’s core values or authentic self (Koole et al., 2010; also see Ryan & Deci, 2000). Consistent with this notion, studies of undergraduates indicate that positive affect predicts meaning in life more strongly among students with lower religious involvement or students who were not primed with positive religious words relative to those who were primed (Hicks & King, 2008).

**Religion and Meaning in Stressful Circumstances**

According to the meaning making model, crises trigger processes of meaning-making, through which individuals reduce discrepancies between their appraised meaning of a particular stressful event and their global beliefs and goals (Park, 2010; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).
Religion is often an integral part of this meaning making process, and appears to exert its most pronounced influence in times of greatest stress (McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993; Pargament, 1997). This influence is due to at least two reasons: (1) for most people, religion is part of their global beliefs and goals, which may be threatened or violated by traumatic events, and (2) most religions provide ways of understanding, reinterpreting, and adding value to difficulties and suffering as well as ways to see the work of a loving God (Pargament, 1997; Park, 2005). For people experiencing injustice, suffering, or trauma, a religious belief system and its associated goals may be the most unfailing way to make meaning from their experiences.

Religion as a framework of meaning can strongly influence individuals’ initial appraisals, or understanding, of particular events. Following those events experienced as highly stressful, individuals have a number of ways of making meaning, which generally involve changing the appraised meaning of events by understanding them in a different and less stressful way (e.g., by understanding the suffering as having redeeming value, or by searching for positive aspects of the event; Baumeister, 1991), or by changing the global beliefs and goals that were violated, to bring them more in line with their current understanding of what has happened (Pargament, 1997; Park, 2010). Finally, religion can be highly involved in the products of these processes, including the positive changes that individuals report following stressful experiences (Park, 2009). The following sections describe how religion is involved in meaning making through the processes of initial appraisals, appraisals of discrepancy, meaning-making coping (efforts at changing both appraised meaning and changing global meaning), and outcomes of the meaning-making process (meanings made).

**Initial appraisals.** Depending on individuals’ specific views, events can be experienced and understood in very different ways; religious beliefs provide many alternatives for
interpreting an event. For example, notions that there is a larger plan, that events are not random, or that personal growth can arise from struggle can inform the specific meaning of an event. Some individuals may believe that God would not harm them or visit upon them more than they could handle, whereas others may believe that God is trying to communicate something important through the event, or that the event is a punishment from God (Furnham & Brown, 1992).

Religiousness can influence how people understand and respond to specific traumatic events. For example, a study found that, among students who were strongly adversely affected by the 2005 hurricanes along the Gulf Coast, higher religiousness was related to greater appraisal of the hurricanes as threatening and as more of a loss and less of a challenge. Further, those who were more religious were more likely to perceive God as responsible for the hurricanes (Newton & McIntosh, 2009). Religious beliefs are clearly implicated in how people understand the afterlife and respond to bereavement (Benore & Park, 2004; Park & Halifax, in press). For example, some people believe that the deceased continue to exist, that they will be reunited with the deceased after death, and even that they can continue to interact with the deceased currently, albeit in a different way, while others believe that there is no afterlife or that it is unpleasant or even painful (Flannelly, Ellison, Galek, & Koenig, 2008).

Event appraisals also include causal attributions, people’s understandings of why a given event occurred. Attributions for negative events can be naturalistic or religious (Spilka et al., 2003). For example, naturalistic explanations for illnesses can include stress, injury, pathogens, and weakened immune systems, while religious attributions can include God’s efforts to teach challenge or punish the afflicted or to teach a lesson to others (Spilka et al., 2003). However, it is quite common for individuals to make naturalistic attributions for the immediate cause of the
event but also invoke religious or metaphysical explanations for the more distal attributions (see Park & Folkman, 1997). For example, a cancer diagnosis may be understood as caused by dietary or environmental causes, but also be seen in a broader context as due to God’s will or as a punishment for previous sinful behavior (Costanzo et al., 2005; Weeks & Lupfer, 2009).

Religious attributions appear to be particularly likely for aversive or harmful events (Gray & Wegner, 2010) and those of high ambiguity and threat (Spilka et al., 2003). The likelihood that an individual will make religious or non-religious attributions for particular experiences or encounter also depends, in large part, on the relative availability of global religious and naturalistic beliefs (Gray & Wegner, 2010; Spilka et al., 2003) as well as the extent to which the explanatory power of each type of attribution is satisfactory (Spilka et al., 2003).

Another type of event appraisal based on religious meaning is that of sacred loss and desecration, the perception that an event poses a threat to a connection with transcendent reality. These appraisals can be perceptions of sacred loss, the loss of something viewed as a manifestation of God or something invested with sacred qualities, or perceptions of desecration, the violation of sacred aspects of life. These types of appraisals can be highly distressing (Warner, Mahoney, & Krumrei, 2009).

Determination of discrepancy/distress. After appraising the initial meaning of an event, individuals must determine the extent to which that meaning is congruent with their general views of the world and their desires and goals. Although the meaning making model is widely discussed in research on stressful life events (e.g., Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Skaggs & Barron, 2006), surprisingly little research has explicitly focused on how people evaluate the discrepancies between their global meaning and their appraisals of potentially traumatic events (Park, Mills, & Edmondson, 2011). Several studies have provided indirect evidence that people
higher in religiousness may perceive traumatic events as more discrepant with their global meaning systems as sudden and inexplicable aversive events shatter the devout individual’s positive global meaning (Park 2005, 2008; Park & Cohen, 1993). For example, in a study of bereaved parents of SIDS infants, parents’ rating of the importance of religion was positively related to their reports of engaging in searching for meaning shortly after the death (McIntosh et al., 1993), suggesting a positive link between religiousness and violation of global meaning.

**Religion and meaning-making coping.** Discrepancy between global and situational meaning produces distress and drives efforts to restore congruency through meaning-making. Meaning making can involve changing one’s appraised meaning of the stressor to make it less aversive or minimize its impact, or changing one’s global beliefs and goals to accommodate this new and unwelcome experience (see Park, 2010, for a review). These meaning making efforts often have a religious aspect. For example, in dealing with highly stressful circumstances, religious reappraisals of stressful event or reconfiguring of one’s global meaning system is common (Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari, & Pargament, 2001; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998) and may facilitate changes in meaning as well as adjustment to stressful events (see Pargament, in press-b, and Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005, for reviews of religious coping).

**Religion and meanings made.** The products of meaning-making can be changes in appraised meaning of the stressful event and, sometimes, changes in global meaning. Because religious beliefs, like other basic beliefs, tend to be relatively stable, people confronting crises are thought to be more likely to reappraise their perceptions of situations to fit their pre-existing beliefs than to change their religious beliefs (Pargament, 1997). Religion can be involved in both meanings made that involve changes in appraised meaning and those that involve changes in global meaning.
Changes in appraised meaning. Religion can be involved in changing the meaning of a stressful situation by offering additional possibilities for causal attributions and by illuminating other aspects of the situation. The motivation to reduce distress generally leads to reappraising stressful situations in a more positive light by giving them a more acceptable meaning that is more consistent with global meaning, although negative reappraisals are sometimes made. One of the most commonly studied changes in situational meaning made is reattributions. Through processes of meaning making, the original causal attribution for an event may be revised (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998). For example, people may initially feel that God neglected to care for them or even deliberately and unjustly caused their stressful event, but over time, they may come to see it as the will of a loving or purposeful God, even if it is a God who is inscrutable and beyond human understanding (Spilka et al., 2003).

Religion offers many avenues for making positive reattributions, and is frequently invoked in the search for a more acceptable reason for an event’s occurrence than what one may have originally made. For example, people can come to see the stressful event as a spiritual opportunity, as the result of a punishing God, or as the result of human sinfulness (Pargament, 1997). Baumeister (1991) wrote of the “attributitional blank check” that many religions provide, the possibility of believing that God may have higher purposes that humans cannot understand, so that one may remain convinced that events that seem highly aversive may, in fact, be serving desirable ends, even if one is unable to guess what these ends might be. Thus, religious explanations permit religious individuals to trust that every event, regardless of its overt appearance and painfulness, is part of God’s plan (Baumeister, 1991).

Although religion commonly facilitates the making of more positive meanings, these reinterpretations are not always positive. For example, people sometimes come to believe that
God harmed them, either through deliberate action or through passivity and neglect. These negative results of the making-meaning process can lead to mistrust, anger, hurt, and disappointment towards God, or even doubt regarding God’s existence (Exline & Rose, in press).

**Changes in global meaning.** Traumatic events are sometimes so discrepant with global meaning that no amount of situational reappraisal can restore a sense of congruence with an individual’s pre-existing global meaning. In these instances, people may reduce the discrepancy between their understanding of an event and their global meaning by changing their fundamental global beliefs or goals, including, perhaps, their understanding of themselves, others, and the world; their views of good and evil; the importance of forgiveness; their sense of meaning in life; and their relationships with family, community, and God (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2005).

For example, sometimes those with faith come to view God as less powerful (Kushner, 1982), or cease to believe in God altogether. Others may come to believe that they are unable to comprehend everything that happens in the world or God’s reasoning for it, while others may become convinced of their own sinful nature (see Exline & Rose, in press).

Individuals may change or reprioritize their global goals by, for example, rededicating themselves to their religious commitments or pledging to be more devout (Emmons, Colby, & Kaiser, 1998). Research suggests that negative events are easier to bear when understood within a benevolent religious framework, and attributions of death, illness, and other major losses to the will of God or to a loving God are generally linked with better outcomes (Pargament, 1997). Periods of extreme stress and subsequent difficulties in making meaning from them sometimes lead to religious conversion, that is, radical religious transformation (Spilka et al., 2003). Within their new denomination or religion, converts may find alternative systems of global beliefs and
goals that help them answer their difficult questions and solve their life problems (Paloutzian, 2005; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998).

**Stress-related growth.** One outcome of meaning making that often straddles the global/situational meaning distinction is stress-related growth. Stress-related growth refers to coming to see a negative event as the catalyst for positive life changes. Some of these changes are profound, reorienting their lives and rededicating themselves to their reconsidered priorities, while others involve smaller changes such as being more intimate with loved ones, handling stress more effectively, taking better care of themselves, seeing their own identities more clearly, feeling closer to God, appreciating more the everyday aspects of life, and having the courage to try new things (Park, 2009). Growth appears to come from looking for positive aspects of negative events and identifying some redeeming features of the experience, which may involve changes in both situational and global meaning (Park & Fenster, 2004).

That positive changes or transformation can arise from difficult and traumatic experiences is an idea common to many religions including Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity (Aldwin, 2007). Many religious traditions contend that spiritual growth occurs primarily during times of suffering. Through suffering, humans develop character, coping skills, and a base of life experience that may enable them to manage future struggles more successfully. Many religions also attempt to cultivate virtues such as compassion, which will make people more attuned to the suffering of others (Exline, 2002).

In fact, one of the most consistent findings regarding predictors of positive life change following life stressors or trauma is that religiousness, measured by various dimensions such as intrinsic religious motivation and religious coping, strongly predicts reports of growth (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). In studies of individuals dealing with a variety of stressful life events,
including bereavement and loss (Park, 2006), sexual assault (Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger, & Long, 2004), interpersonal transgressions (Schultz, Tallman, & Altmaier, 2010), exposure to terrorism (Laufer, Solomon, & Levine, 2010), and cancer survivorship (Park, Edmondson, & Blank, 2009), religiousness has consistently found to predict stress-related growth.

Further, this stress-related growth is often religious in nature. Growth following stressful encounters generally involves increased coping skills, increased social support and relationships, and deepened or renewed perspectives and philosophies of life (Park, 2009), and religion is often an element of each of these changes. For example, research has demonstrated that, following a stressful encounter, many people report feeling closer to God, more certain of their faith, and more religious; they often report using more religious coping and increasing their commitment to their religion and their involvement in their religious community (e.g., Cole, Hopkins, Tisak, Steel, & Carr, 2008).

**Future Research Directions**

Although the needs for meaning, and the pervasive role of religion in life meaning, have long been the focus of social scientists, empirical progress in this area has suffered from a lack of clarity regarding meaning. Framing the “need for meaning” as the “need for a functional meaning system” helps to anchor the issues of meaning and religiousness/spirituality in ways that allow delineation of many specific types of meaning, contexts, and processes, allowing for more sophisticated empirical research. Advances will come through future research in this area. This research should be longitudinal and, ideally, prospective in design. Meaning making and meanings made must be assessed at different times, and processes of meaning making should be assessed carefully, examining both deliberate meaning making attempts as well as more automatic types of processing (see Park, 2010, for an overview of methodological issues).
Several research directions seem particularly promising. First, the complex relations between religious and secular aspects of global meaning and meaning making processes are virtually unexamined. Most extant studies focus on very circumscribed sets of variables, but in human lives, religious and non-religious aspects of global meaning are intermingled, and the extent to which religiousness underlies secular meaning systems may be a key individual difference factor. Further, little research has linked these global meaning systems with processes of meaning making. More sophisticated research that follows individuals over time as they deal with major life stressors, comparing religious and secular meaning making processes and meanings made (some of which may entail changes in global meaning),

Another important direction for future research is delving deeper into the issue of discrepancy, which is the construct on which the meaning making is explicitly based. Yet the conditions under which people experience violations of their global religious meaning remains unknown. Sometimes individuals’ religious meaning systems are strong enough to protect them from experiencing violations (e.g., a belief that God has a plan, albeit one that may be beyond human understanding). Yet research has also demonstrated that stronger religiousness is related to more violations and more cognitive processing, at least following bereavement (e.g., McIntosh et al., 1993; Park, 2005).

Some researchers have recently framed religiousness as culture (e.g., Cohen, 2009). This perspective opens many doors to research examining meaning systems as cultural elements. Further, most of the research on religion and meaning has been conducted in the US with primarily Christian participants. The need to examine global and situational meaning and the roles of religion in diverse populations across the world is obvious.
Finally, future research should focus more explicitly on the content of religious beliefs and goals. Most research in the area of religion and meaning has, to date, employed fairly generic measures of religiousness that provide little information on the specifics of what a person believes or holds as important, let alone how different beliefs and goals predict violations and... The recent focus on specific theodicies (Hale-Smith et al., 2011) is a welcome advance; similar developments in other types of beliefs and goals will help to illuminate religious meaning systems.
References


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Kruglanski, xxx This volume.


Global Meaning

- Beliefs (e.g., theodicies, nature of humans, sin, afterlife, control, justice)
- Goals (e.g., ultimacy, sanctified goals, transcendence) and Values (guidelines for achieving goals)
- Sense of Life as Purposeful

Situational Meaning

Stressful Event

Appraised Event Meaning

- Causal attributions
- Primary appraisals (threat, loss, challenge)
- Desecration or sacred loss

Discrepant? Yes

Distress

No

Distress

Religious Meaning Making

- Benevolent religious reappraisal
- Reappraisal of God’s powers
- Demonic reappraisal

Meanings Made

- Changes in appraised meaning
- Changes in global meaning
- Stress-related growth