



# Religious and Spiritual Struggles: A Brief Overview

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# Emotional Benefits of Religion & Spirituality

- attachment security (Beck & McDonald, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2004; Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2004)
- comfort (Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000)
- sense of meaning (Park, 2013)
- sense of compensatory control (Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010)
- ultimate hope (Witvliet, in progress)
- reduced fear of death (Vail et al., 2010)

# Social and Behavioral Benefits of Religion & Spirituality

- social support (see work by Krause, George, Koenig, Elllison)
- moral community (Graham & Haidt, 2010)
- may foster self-control (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009)
  - virtue
  - mindfulness
  - good health behaviors
- personal accountability for moral behavior (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011)

Given all of these benefits...  
religion can be a powerful  
coping resource.



(See Ken Pargament's  
large body of work on  
religious coping.)

But is faith all about sunshine and rainbows?



# Some Personal Challenges

# Sense of ultimate hope? Reduced fear of death?

Yes...

...but only if you choose the one correct  
(and narrow) path.



# Attachment security and comfort?

Yes...

...assuming that you get the nice side of God.





# Sense of moral community?

Yes...

...but also a lot of fear and pride.

- embattled posture
- insularity
- self-righteousness; put down others



# Self-regulation?

Yes...

...but often fear-based, rule-based

- mistrust of human nature
- guilt and shame; self-abasement
- reluctance to question beliefs/rules



Close-Up: Anger toward God

# Findings in This Section Are Based on Research with...

- A national sample (General Social Survey)
- Undergraduates
- Web-based adult samples
- Homeless men
- Bereaved individuals
- Cancer patients (longitudinal)
- Family members of hospice patients

# Frequency of Negative Feelings toward God



- Similar patterns across many groups:
  - E.g., U. S. adults, college students, cancer patients, family members of hospice patients
  - Usually about ½ report some negative feelings toward God
  - usually low in intensity

**So... anger toward God is a common experience.**

# What about Nonbelievers?

Some (not all!) atheists and agnostics report anger around the idea of God.

(Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*)

# Media Misunderstandings

January 1, 2011, CNN.com



“Anger at God common,  
even among atheists”

For some  
nonbelievers...

Idea of God



Bad memories of old  
“anger at God” events



Anger



For some  
nonbelievers...

Idea of God



Negative  
God Image



Anger

For some  
nonbelievers...



Idea of God

Negative thoughts  
about religion  
(or religious people)



Anger

# When Do People Get Angry at God?

- *Tragedies that can't easily be blamed on people:*
  - Death, serious illness or injury, natural disasters, accidents
- *Sometimes when people can be blamed:*
  - abuse, wartime atrocities, assault, murder, divorce, abandonment, betrayal
- *Disappointing (but not traumatic) events:*
  - personal failures, “unanswered” prayers



People may not fully understand  
why they are angry at God.

# Love and Anger



- Most people report more positive feelings than negative feelings toward God.
- “If I’m mad at God, does this mean that I don’t love / respect God?”
- Positive and negative feelings toward God often coexist.

Exline, J. J., Park, C. L., Smyth, J. M., & Carey, M. P. (2011). Anger toward God: Social-cognitive predictors, prevalence, and links with adjustment to bereavement and cancer. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100, 129-148.

# Secrecy

People often see anger toward God  
as morally wrong. (Exline, Kaplan, &  
Grubbs, 2012, PRS)

If so, they may not admit it:

- to other people
- to themselves
- to God

Exline & Grubbs, 2011 (JPT)

→ Under-reporting?



Anger toward God can become a forbidden or “taboo” topic.





# Telling Someone

- Sample: Adults who told others about their anger toward God
- Mostly supportive responses (e.g., it's OK; I've felt that way)
- But about  $\frac{1}{2}$  received some unsupportive responses (judging; shaming)

Exline, J. J., & Grubbs, J. (2011). "If I tell others about my anger toward God, how will they respond?" Predictors, associated behaviors, and outcomes in an adult sample. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 39, 304-415.



# Telling Someone



- Supportive responses were associated with:
  - more approach behaviors toward God
  - strengthened faith



- Unsupportive responses were associated with:
  - attempts to suppress anger
  - continued anger
  - turning away from God (exit)
  - substance use

Exline & Grubbs (2011)



# Bijou's Story



# What I Learned...

There's no simple cure-all for anger at God.

Your favorite theological “fixes” may not work for others.

Be careful about imposing your own theological assumptions, especially in diverse environments.





Ann Yali



Bill Sanderson

## Our Early Attempts to Study R/S Struggle

Religious Comfort & Strain Scale (Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000)

Three types of religious strain:

- Alienation from God

- Interpersonal (Religious Rifts)

- Fear/guilt

# Assessment of R/S Struggle

- Ken Pargament and colleagues
  - Religious coping in response to negative life events
  - Can be positive or negative
  - R/S struggle = negative religious coping
  - Widely used measures
    - RCOPE (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000).
    - Brief RCOPE (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998).





# New Measure: Religious and Spiritual Struggles (RSS) Scale

- 26 items
- 6 subscales
- Can focus on specific timeframe (e.g., past week, past month) or specific event

Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali (2014, *Psychology of Religion & Spirituality*)

# Divine Struggle



- Negative thoughts or feelings focused on God
- Sample items:
  - Felt angry at God
  - Felt as though God had abandoned me

# Intrapersonal I: Moral Struggle / Guilt



- Struggle to follow moral or spiritual principles
- Examples:
  - worried that my actions were morally or spiritually wrong
  - felt guilty for not living up to my moral standards



# Intrapersonal II: Crises of Ultimate Meaning



- Spirituality often involves a sense of deeper meaning in life
- Struggle as absence of meaning
- Sample items:
  - felt as though my life had no deeper meaning
  - questioned whether life really matters

# Intrapersonal III: Doubt and Confusion

- doubts/questions about beliefs
- implies distress (confusion, worry)
- sample items:
  - worried about whether my beliefs about religion/spirituality were correct
  - felt confused about my religious/spiritual beliefs



# Interpersonal



- Conflicts with other people or institutions re: religious issues
- Sample items:
  - had conflicts with other people about religious/spiritual matters
  - felt hurt, mistreated, or offended by religious/spiritual people

# Demonic/ Supernatural Evil



- Belief that devil or evil spirits are attacking us or causing negative events
- Understudied (despite RCOPE subscale)
- Sample items:
  - worried that the problems I was facing were the work of the devil or evil spirits
  - felt attacked by the devil or by evil spirits

# More Work on the RSS Measure

Hisham  
Abu-  
Raiya



Validation with Jewish and Muslim samples in Israel

Nick  
Stauner



Bifactor modeling and measurement invariance tests

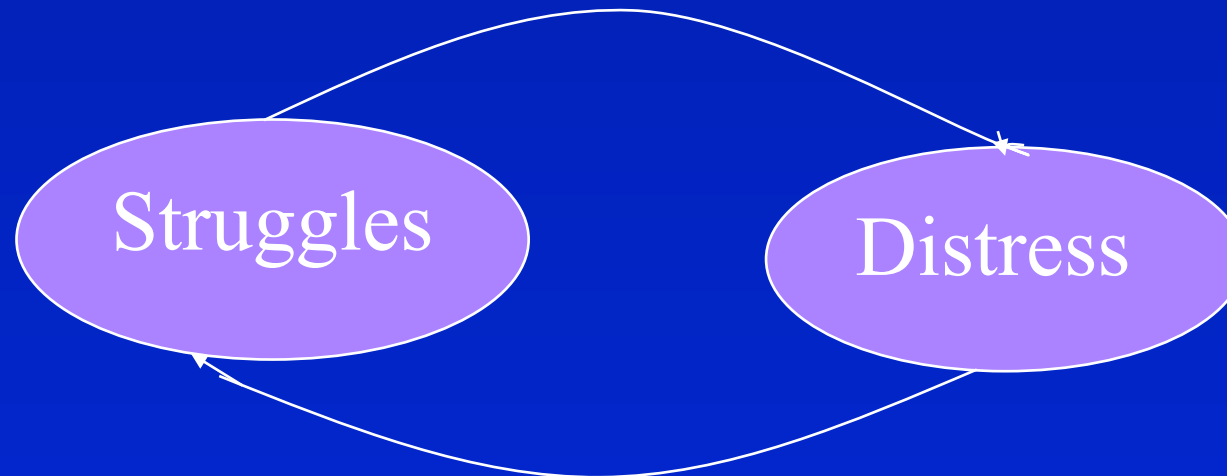
Steffany  
Homolka



Struggles among youth

# Spiritual Struggles and Distress

- Spiritual struggles correlate with difficulties in:
  - Mental health (depression, anxiety, stress, anger)
  - Physical health (pain, immune functioning, mortality rates)
  - Self-regulation (eating, substance use, pornography use)



- A few longitudinal studies
  - Struggles predict distress and vice versa

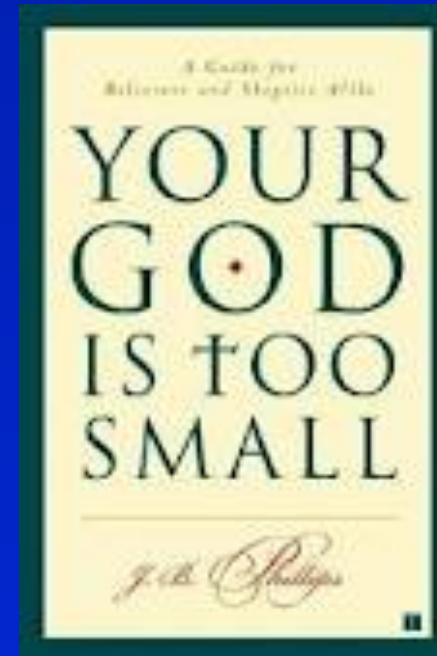
# Does R/S Struggle Lead to Growth?



- Still UNCLEAR!
- Mixed findings (Pargament et al., 2006)
- Is it the struggle, or the response to it, that → growth?

# Anger at God: Can It Foster Growth?

- Honest disclosure may increase intimacy with God.
- Challenge old or simplistic ideas about God





# Moral Struggle / Guilt: What Good Is It?

- Reality-based awareness of moral limitations
- Can encourage repentance, reconciliation



# Crises of Ultimate Meaning: Where's the Hope?

- see the emptiness of certain values (e.g., financial gain; social climbing; power)
- seek deeper purpose for your life



# Doubt and Confusion: Possible Benefits?

- Cultivate critical thinking
- Clarify what we truly believe vs. what we've simply been told



# Interpersonal Struggles with Religion: How Can They Help Us?

- Cultivate interpersonally-focused virtues: love, courage, patience, humility, forgiveness
- When religious systems become corrupt, you may be called to be part of the solution.



# Demonic Appraisals: What Purpose Might They Serve?

- Less self-blame; less blame of God
- Good vs. evil focus can be empowering



# Growth from R/S Struggle: Some Thorny Issues

# 1. What Exactly Do We Mean by Growth?

There's good agreement on these:

- Improved character/virtue
  - Life seems more meaningful
  - Better relationships with others
- 
- But there are tougher decisions, too...

# Which One Is Growth?

OR...

Do we learn to focus on the hereafter?  
on the here and now?





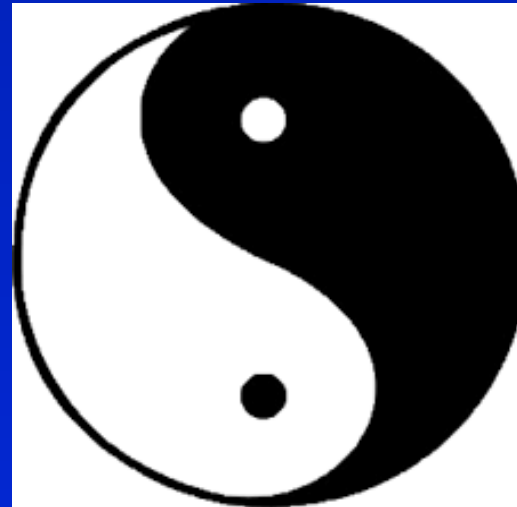
# Which One Is Growth?

OR...

Get serious about  
spiritual warfare?



Is dualism just part of  
the problem?



# Which One Is Growth?

OR...

- Fully embrace your faith tradition?
- Decide that it's time to leave?



## 2. Are We the Only Initiators of Growth?



Ken Pargament



Todd Hall



Valencia Harriott

- Among Christians, perceived growth from struggle is linked with:
  - Our helpful actions: positive religious coping
- BUT ALSO:
  - Perception of God's helpful actions
- New work:
  - Perceived communication from God

# And what about ..?

- Mystical and near-death experiences
- Angel encounters
- Contact with spirits



### 3. More than Words

- Psychologists often emphasize verbal processing and analytical thinking.
- Are there roads to growth and healing that don't rely on words or logical analysis?

# 3. More than Words

- SILENCE

# 3. More than Words

- SILENCE
- Music





### 3. More than Words

- SILENCE
- Music
- Visual arts





### 3. More than Words

- SILENCE
- Music
- Visual arts
- Physical movement



### 3. More than Words

- SILENCE
- Music
- Visual arts
- Physical movement
- Energy work



# 3. More than Words

- SILENCE
- Music
- Visual arts
- Physical movement
- Energy work
- Touch



### 3. More than Words

- SILENCE
- Music
- Visual arts
- Physical movement
- Energy work
- Touch & sex



### 3. More than Words

- SILENCE
- Music
- Visual arts
- Physical movement
- Energy work
- Touch & sex
- Joy & play



# 3. More than Words

- SILENCE
- Music
- Visual arts
- Physical movement
- Energy work
- Touch & sex
- Joy & play
- Symbols and metaphors



# Struggles as Necessary Seasons?



# Beauty of Light and Shadow





# Heroic Journeys

have their share of trials...



# Heroic Journeys

usually have storms...

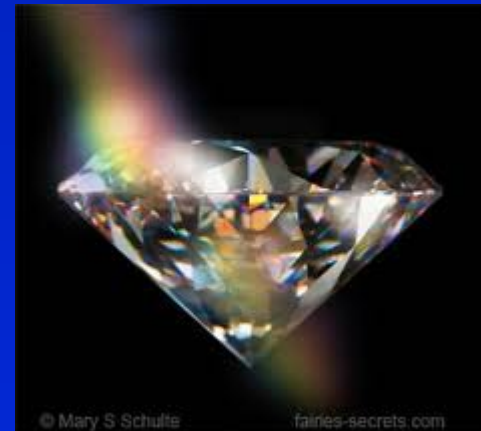


And can heroes exist without their  
villains?



# Can Struggles Help Us...

- to become “as silver refined”?
- or diamonds, formed under pressure?



If struggle really is a catalyst for growth...



or a vital part of life's journey...





...then maybe it  
does all come  
back to rainbows.

