Spirituality, Meaning, and Successful Aging
Paul T. P. Wong

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The importance role of religions and spirituality

On going survey by the Princeton Religion Research Center (PRRC) shows that more than 75% of Americans consider religion very important in their lives. Baril and Mori (1991) reported that 42% of Canadian seniors attended religious services or meetings at least once a week in 1,990 as compared to 31% for those age 45 to 64. They also reported that women tend to be more active in attending religious services than men.

Working with seniors

In the last two decades, research has shown clearly the importance of religion and spirituality in health care. As a result, the recent ethical stands of American Psychological Association's recognize religion and spirituality as an important element in understanding and working with individual clients. This applies all the more so to seniors, because religions even a more significant role in their lives.

Thus, those who serve and help seniors, need to not only understand individual client's religious and spiritual perspective, ut also to be aware of how their personal beliefs might affect their interactions with seniors.

RELIGION DEFINED

Religion is much more than a set of doctrines and rituals. It affects how people live and how they die-it affects their moral decisions as well as the choices they make every day. It gives them hope and comfort in adversity. It enables them to see the big picture of beauty and goodness beyond the physical and social world

The fact that religion has persisted throughout human history suggests that it serves important adaptive functions (Abramowitz, 1993; Koenig & Siegler, 1988). Religion remains one of the most potent forces in human existence, because it is rooted in human nature. Neuroscience research also recognizes that deep within all people, there is a yearning for connection with the sacred and the transcendent. Some even suggest that we are hardwired for religion because of its proven adaptive importance (   )
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Fowler (1981) believed that "faith is a human universal. We are endowed at birth with nascent capacities for faith…. Faith is interactive and social; it requires community, language, ritual and nurture" (p. xiii). Tillich (1952) pointed out that "it is the finitude of

being which drives us the question of God" (p. 166). Hart (1977) made an even stronger case for the universality of religion:

> Human being is a religious creature… in all of his aspects. Created in the image of God, his whole life must mirror service to his Creator. Man cannot exist outside of the service to his God…. It may be that he serves the true God, the creator; it may be that he serves an idol, be it part of the rest of creation or an idolization of himself. But serve he must. Religion defines man, it is the meaning of his creation; to this end he was called forth. (p. 77).

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Broadly defined, religion means "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [or women] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James, 1902, p.81). James' emphasis on a personal encounter with the divine remains an essential ingredient of religion. In a similar vein, religion has been defined by Moberg (1970) as "the personal beliefs, values and activities pertinent to that which is supernatural, mysterious and awesome, which transcends immediate situations and which pertains to questions of final causes and ultimate ends of man and the universe" (p.175).

Tillich (1963) also emphasized religion as the quest for the ultimate meaning of human existence: "Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life" (p. 4). Furthermore, Allport (1950) pointed out that religion enables people to understand a universe that is basically incomprehensible and gain a glimpse of the design of seemingly unrelated fragments.

Searching for the commonalties of different religions, Edwards (7972) identified the following defining characteristics: belief in a supernatural intelligent being or beings; a worldview interpreting the significance of human life; belief in experience after death; a moral code believed to be sanctioned by a supernatural being; prayer and ritual, sacred objects and places; and religious experience – awe, mystical experience, revelations. Each of the components has important implications for how people live out their lives as individuals and as a society. In summary, religion brings a sense of coherence, hope, and significance to people's existence, and enables them to transcend the banality of everyday living. As a shared system of rituals and symbols, religion also provides a sense of community.

SPIRITUALITY DEFINED

Spirituality is a more inclusive construct than religion. It is possible for a person to be spiritual without being religious in the traditional sense. According to Sermabeikian (1994), "Although spirituality is expressed in religion, as well as philosophy and culture, it transcends ideologies, rituals, dogma, and institutions" (p. 180).

Moberg (1971) provided a comprehensive definition of spirituality. He proposed that the spiritual pertains to an individual's inner resources, ultimate concerns, and the central philosophy of life, regardless of whether it is religious or nonreligious. He believed that all people are spiritual. According to Brown (1987), for nonreligious people, almost anything such as gardening, ecology, music, or humanism can be a form of spirituality. It is true that in certain activities, the experience of a "flow" or an intense engagement is akin to a spiritual experience. It may also be argued that the feelings of oneness and ecstasy in sexual intercourse also qualify as a spiritual experience. However, when spirituality is all inclusive, it loses its unique meaning.

The position taken here is that spirituality, at a certain level, is necessarily related to religion, but not limited to it. Merton (1958) pointed out that "spiritual life is not mental life. It is not thought alone…. Everything must be elevated and transformed by the action of god, in love and faith" (p. 27). May (1982) also recognized that "no spiritual quest can progress very far without becoming religious" (p. 33).

According to Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, and Saunders (1988), "Spirituality which comes from the Latin, *spiritus,* meaning 'breath of life,' is a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate" (p. 10).

Marcoen (1994) also emphasized the subjective nature and value orientation of spirituality, which "exists as a way of perceiving and conceiving reality as a whole, holding and realizing certain human values, aims and goals, experiencing deep, positive emotions accompanying behaviors and actions in daily life" (p. 533). This spiritual orientation is considered as an innate capacity or tendency to transcend self-interest (Chandler, Miner-Holden, & Kolan der, 1992). Spirituality has also been equated with what individuals consider to be sacred and most important in their lives (Gilchrist,1992).

Ganje-Fling and McCarthy (1996) provided. They described spiritually "awake" individuals as those who grapple with such existential questions as: "Why are we here?", "How should we live?", "What is our place in the universe?", and "Where do we go after death?" They offered a comprehensive definition:

> Spirituality is a complex, multifaceted construct that involves ultimate and
> personal truths that individuals hold as inviolable in their lives. This definition
> of spirituality is broad enough to incorporate religious, existential,
> and unstructured orientations, as well as concepts such as God, Higher
> Power, and spiritual source. (p. 253)

Evans (1990) attempted to define what spirituality is not. First of all, it is "not to be a ghost residing in the body . . . it is important to see that spirit is something I myself am; it is not an entity inside of me" (p. 43). Second, "spiritual existence" is not "simply indwelling by God's spirit" (p.44) because rationality is still involved. He concluded that

"spirituality must be understood as both a descriptive and normative term. It is both ontological and ethical, connected to what I *am* and to what I must *become*. Spirituality is partially something to strive for" (p. 44).

Spirituality has also been equated with spiritual well-being or spiritual health. According to the National Interfaith Coalition on Aging in 1975, spiritual well-being is conceptualized as "affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self and community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness" (Moberg, 1990, p. 6). Thus, spiritual well-being consists of both vertical and horizontal dimensions. The former refers to a person's sense of well-being in relation to God, whereas the later refers to a sense of life purpose and life satisfaction (Moberg, 1971).

Plouffe (1992) provided a comprehensive definition of religion and spirituality: "At the heart of every religion and of contemporary growth psychology is the conviction that life has a spiritual dimension, that life must be dedicated to the fulfillment of meaning…. In a broad sense, to be spiritual is to be sensitive to the dimension of meaning in one's life" (p. 3).

Viktor Frankl (1969) introduced the *noetic* dimension, which has also been referred to as the *spiritual* dimension, or the *defiant human spirit.* Such behaviors as the quest for meaning, self-transcendence, and taking a heroic stand in the face of suffering are assumed to occur only in the noetic, or noological, dimension. Frankl seemed to consider noological and spiritual dimensions as equivalent; he introduced the term *noological* in order to avoid the religious connotations of the word *spiritual.*

In the nursing literature, Emblen (1992) defined spirituality as a "personal life principle which animates a transcendent quality of relationship with God or god being" (p. 45). In a more recent publication, Emblen and Conger (1997) proposed a broadened use of the term *spirituality* as the umbrella term with religion as one of the components. According to her systems model, life events and changes (Input) trigger an adjustment process. The spiritual belief system and the values (Throughput) held by the individual serve a stabilizing function and produce specific religious practices (output) according to an individual's cultural and religious orientation.

SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIONS COMPARED

Having surveyed the different views of religion and spirituality, what conclusion can be drawn? Briefly, it is proposed that religion is cultural phenomenon created by human beings who are spiritual beings. Just as arts are the natural expression of individuals with the gift of artistic creativity, so is religion the natural expression of people endowed with the gift of spirituality. In other words, religion is a manifestation of an inner reality, which is the spiritual dimension of humanity. As a cultural phenomenon, religion tends to involve social institutions, shared beliefs, symbols, and rituals. However, as a personal, subjective experience, religion and spirituality can be used interchangeably, because both constructs have the same defining characteristics:

1. Both involve faith in the existence of a spiritual and supernatural power.
2. Both involve faith in the existence of a spiritual dimension of human existence.
3. Both represent a way of interpreting the human experience and bringing meaning and coherence into life.
4. Both recognize the human inner potential to transcend past and circumstance.
5. Both recognize the human capacity to know and communicate with God.
6. Both recognize the will to meaning as a primary, innate human motivation.
7. Both value what is sacred, true, and good.
8. Both involve an inner awareness and a subjective experience of the spiritual realm.
9. Both encourage personal encounters with the mystical, supernatural reality.
10. Both serve as an inner resource for hope, courage, inspiration, and well-being.
11. Both involve affirmation and celebration of life and human existence.
12. both involve feelings of self-transcendence, awe, and worship.

In view of these similarities, spirituality and religion are used interchangeably throughout this chapter, as long as any one of the previous common elements is being discussed. Even though there is considerable overlap between the two constructs, there are also areas of difference as shown by xxxx

HOW IS RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY RELATD TO PERSONAL MEANING?

The previous review has made it very clear that a major component of spirituality and religion is its concern with the meaning of life, death, and suffering. Any religion worth its salt provides answers to such existential issues as "Why are we here?", "Where did we come from?", "Who am I?", "Why men?", "What will happen to me after death?", and "What is the ultimate purpose of this world?" By virtue of its beliefs in a transcendent, sovereign God and is affirmation in afterlife, religion tends to offer the most satisfying and coherent answers regarding questions of ultimate meaning. In fact, it is difficult, if not impossible, to address issues of ultimate meaning without being religious. Similarly, a person cannot go very far on a spiritual journey without having to wrestle with questions of meaning. this section discusses in greater detail the linkage between religion/spirituality and personal meaning.

Personal Meaning Defined

Elsewhere, I have defined personal meaning as an individually constructed cognitive system, which endows life with personal significance. I have also stated that the meaning system consists of three components, namely, cognitive, motivational, and affective

(Wong, 1989, 19997b). According to dittmann-Kohli (1991), the personal meaning system is most important in terms of overall functioning, because

> It is a dynamic, centralized structure with various sub-domains. It is conceived as a cognitive map that orients the individual in steering through the life course. The personal meaning system comprises the categories (conceptual schemes) used for self and life interpretation. It is a cognitive-affective network containing person-directed and environment-directed motivational cognitions and understandings, like goal concepts and behavior plans, conceptions of character and competencies, of internal processes and mechanisms, various kinds of standards and self-appraisals.

Frankl (1963) asserted that the "will to meaning" is a significant and universal human motive. Humans are not merely biological, social, and psychological beings, but also spiritual beings who are able to transcend these dimensions to a level of "human spirituality" by virtue of being free to create meaning for their own lives. Frustration of the will to meaning leads to an "existential vacuum." Symptoms of an existential vacuum include a sense of meaninglessness, feelings of boredom, apathy, or indifference.

Different individuals in different generations may find meaning in different ways. On the basis of prior research, Reker and Wong (1988) summarized the various sources of meaning: (a) meeting basic needs, such as food, shelter, and safety; (b) leisure activities or hobbies; (c) creative work; (d) personal relationships (family or friends); (e) personal achievement (education or career); (f) personal growth (wisdom or maturity), social and political activism (such as the peace movement or antipollution campaigns); (g) altruism; (h) enduring values and ideals (truth, goodness, beauty, and justice); (i) traditions and culture, such as heritage or ethnocultural associations; (j) legacy (leaving a mark for posterity); and (k) religion.

Religion/Spirituality as a Source of Meaning

Even in an increasingly secularized society, religion remains a potent source of meaning for a variety of reasons. for example, religious beliefs in immortality, the existence of heaven, and the ultimate meaning of life provide an effective antidote to death anxiety (Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994). Religion provides both direction and support to put life and death into perspective (Achenbaum, 1985). James (1902) pointed out that religion enables people to gain deeper insights of everyday experience :"When we see all things in God, and refer all things to Him, we read in common matters superior expressions of meaning" (p. 475). This section presents a more detailed analysis of the religion/spirituality and meaning connection.

Jung (1964) underscored the power of meaning in coping with both the hardships of life and the incomprehensible nature of human existence: "Man positively needs general ideas and convictions that will give a meaning to his life and enable him to find a place for himself in the universe. He can stand the most incredible hardships when he is convinced that they make sense; he is crushed when, on top of all his misfortunes, he has

to admit that he is taking part in a 'tale told by an idiot.' It is the role of religion to give a meaning to the life of man" (p. 89).

Morris (1980) was more explicit about the role of religion in answering existential questions: "Religious language is concerned with the ultimate, existential issues of life, the questions of security, meaning, frustration, and hopes: 'What is my origin?', 'Who am I?', 'what should I become and be?', 'what is of value?', 'what are the meaning and future destiny of my life and the meaning of my death?' When we ask these questions, we have entered the overlapping horizons of religion and psychology" (p. 95).

Medow and Kahoe (1984) pointed out that in spite of the advances of science and technology, many existential issues require religious insights: "the giving of meaning to life is a primary function of religion" (p. 26). They suggested that people respond to the experience of human limitation or finitude with three different choices: "deny limitation, hide from limitation, or accept limitation" (p. 12). People who deny limitation "tread the shaky ground between magic and religion" (p. 13). People who avoid limitation "are religious by habit only, and conform to and observe the religion into which they were born without examining it" (p. 13). Acceptance takes two forms. Accepting human limitations without the hope of finding meaning will lead to despair. On the other hand, "when someone accepts both personal limitation and a meaningfulness greater than the individual, that person usually tries to conform to greater meaning" (p. 14). Intrinsic religiousness enables individuals to find meaning and comfort even in the face of suffering, loss, and death.

Roberts (1984) also stressed that religion is primarily concerned with "why" questions, but "the religious response to the question 'Why?' is different from the answer provided by science. Science looks for empirical causality in answering the question. Religion answers it primarily in terms of values: what does a particular even *mean* in understanding the ultimate purpose or goal of one's life?" (p. 57). In short religion enables individuals to see the significance and value of specific events, which are located in the big picture of ultimate meaning.

Hay (1987) pointed out that religious "stories are revered because they give meaning and coherence to life and awaken the motivation to strive after goals" 9p. 67). He concluded that "all recent studies which look directly at the 'experiential' dimension of religion show that it is typically associated with personal integration, a sense of meaningfulness in life, and concern for social justice" 9p. 182).

According to Fowler (1981), faith is the heart and soul of religion and it is faith that enables people to find meaning. Here is a sample of what Fowler had to say about faith and meaning:
- "Faith is a person's or group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose" (p. 4).

- "We are concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will make life worth living…. We look for something to love that loves us, something the value that gives us value, something to honor and respect that has the power to sustain our being