

## Last but not Least: Religion and Meaning of Life

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During the two years that the COVID-19 pandemic raged through the world and made people question their lives and circumstances, one of the biggest questions that remained was whether religion matters. Religion of all forms was hit hard with the closure of places of worship and fellowship. Leaders like Pope Francis urged people to remember their duties as Christians in the Christian community. With *Amoris Laetitia*, he spoke about the importance of the Church and the community coming together to help each other to strengthen our faith community's foundation.

Some studies suggest that religion can help and harm families (Barter & Zatin-Osburn, 2014). As people question their religious belief and whether it has meaning in their lives, the Last thought for this edition focuses on some empirical literature that points to the connection between religion and purpose in life (Park 2005).

1. Role of meaning-making in coping: Meaning in life depends on purpose, efficacy, value, and self-worth (Baumeister, 1991). One of the ways of understanding the process of coping is the meaning-making coping model. Theorists have proposed that this model helps study adjustment to major trauma and loss (Mikulincer & Florian, 1996). The model posits that there is a Global belief that are basic internal cognitive structures that people construct about the nature of the world. These internal representations of desired outcomes can motivate people in their lives. They have appraised meaning like God's will, or act of coincidence, about events in their life like a loss, threat, challenge, or about decisions regarding the ways to cope with an event.

According to the mode, to cope with distress in life, individuals must either adjust their views of the events or revise their goals and beliefs about the world to cater to the new information. For example, with the untimely loss of a loved one, there can be more distress in an individual. The individual is now in an uncomfortable state of a discrepancy between their appraised and global meaning, which involves losing control, predictability, or comprehension of the world. To recover from the distress, they should adjust either of their processes. Changes in appraised meaning can lead to lower levels of depression or higher levels of subjective well-being (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996). Thus, in the scenario mentioned above, the person believes that they see the hand of a loving God as being responsible for the event. They may evolve in the process of meaning-making mechanism (Baumeister, 1991). Religion is thus a meaning system that can significantly influence the process of meaning-making coping.

2. Religion as a meaning system: Religion can be defined as a “search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament, 1997, p. 32). It is argued that religion grew out of a human need for comprehending the most profound problems of our existence (Geertz, 1996). As religion acts as an individual’s core schema, informed belief about the self and the world, and provide an understanding of mundane and extraordinary occurrences (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003), religion hence is central to the life purpose of many people (Pargament, 1997).

Studies among older adults have shown that they rely on religion more as a source of comfort and significance. Despite evidence that the relationship between religiousness and life satisfaction is small (Diener & Clifton, 2002), there are consistent positive correlations between religiousness and well-being. Intrinsic religious orientation and religious involvement had an indirect effect on subjective well-being.

3. Religion and meaning-making are coping: It is highly likely that an individual for whom religion is a highly salient aspect of their understanding of self and world would be far more likely to use coping than those who are less devout (Pargament, 1997). Religion has its most significant impact by helping restore beliefs that the world is safe, predictable, fair, controllable, and even that a benevolent God is in charge of it all (Dull & Skokan, 1995).

Religion can thus be involved in helping a person in a stressful situation by allowing them to see the positive aspects that came to be from the stressful situation and by providing a means to make more benign reattributions. For example, often, people come to believe that the stressful event is the will of a loving God, even if God is beyond human understanding (Park & Cohen, 1992). Pargament (1997) had described that religion has the power to transform the meaning of events: “When the sacred is seen working its will in life’s events, what first seems random, nonsensical and tragic is changed to be with God, a challenge to help others grow, or a loving act meant to prevent something worse from taking place” (p. 223).

Meaning in life is a crucial element of coping and psychological well-being among people trying to cope with life’s challenges and difficulties (Krok, 2015). Evidence suggests that the adjustment outcome of religious meaning-making coping is often positive. Pargament (1997) pointed out how people who believe in a fair, just, benevolent, loving God were associated with a greater sense of well-being. Stress-related growth is also often of a religious matter- positive changes in coping skills, relationships, life perspective are common after a stressful event. Though there can be initial disturbances in the individual due to the questioning of their global beliefs, there is an overall positive reappraisal that can decrease long-term distress.

Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where deep losses were felt around the world with the loss of loved ones, loss of a secure job or a stable income, loss of personal space and identity, there is an increase in the level of distress, anxiety, stress, and depression among the community. Resilience is the ability of the individual to withstand setbacks, adapt positively, and bounce back from adversity (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2001). Since religion has a relationship with stress-related growth, studies have been done on its impact on resilience. A survey on health-care workers (Chang, Chen, Lee, Lin, Chiang, Tsai, Kuo, & Lung, 2021) found that those with a form of religiousness- Christians or Catholics- perceived better psychological well-being, and Buddhists or Taoists were less likely to experience mental distress, which would indirectly increase their level of happiness.

## **Implications**

The diverse and robust influence of religious meaning-making coping on the well-being and functioning of the individual indicates the importance of implication in clinical or counseling work and pastoral care. Religion can play a significant role throughout an individual's life, especially during stressful life experiences.

Pastoral care, lay ministry, and faith community can encourage the people of faith to be a part of religious understanding of the self, world, and God. Such fellowships provide a much-needed support group that individuals or families can rely upon during times of distress. Often, it is the lack of a support group or a shoulder to cry on that is lacking in a grieving person's life. Counseling work during pastoral care can focus on helping the individual come to make meaning out of their suffering by reflecting on the teaching of their religion. The larger cultural and religious institutions can thus provide a great deal of support and structure for individuals to conduct themselves and run to during times of crisis.

There is also a need for the Church community to extend aid to the health workers and the health care system. By ensuring that the people are aware of the safety precautions and follow safety procedures in places of worship or fellowships, they can ensure that fewer people get sick and the health-care system's burden is reduced. The health-care professional who spends a large amount of their time and energy treating other people while having less regard for their own lives need to be cared for and respected. Other than monetary aids or funds to help the health-care system, the Church can ensure that any support in terms of being there for them in the mental and physical stress, a word of encouragement, and thanksgiving can go a long way to encouraging them.

While giving care and support to families in distress, pastors and priests have to realize that their religiousness regarding a sense of significance and purpose should result in autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance (Krok, 2015). Also, this can be used to explore the personal goal systems of an individual as priests accompany the individual or family through a struggle. Overall, the Church needs to stick together and support each other through religion's meaning-making process.