

## Psychology and Religion: Are They Compatible?

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### Abstract

The author uses the following operational definitions to explore the relationship between psychology and religion: *psychology*—the study of the human soul; *spirituality*—the search or will for ultimate meaning; *faith*—whatever or whomever one trusts most to provide ultimate meaning; *religion*—the symbolic expression of faith through myth, story, and ritual to support ultimate meaning (Evans, 1997; Einstein, 1984; Fowler, 1981; Frankl, 1984, 1997; Fromm, 1950; Tillich, 1957). The author concludes that people who have similar faith tend to share similar religion (Evans, 1997). Exploring traditional world religions as well as non-traditional religious paths, the author considers the seemingly innate desire for spirituality as expressed in the search for ultimate meaning. The author also explores an understanding of religion as defined by the field of psychology and argues that there are certain expressions within the study of psychology that could be considered a form of religion.

### Introduction

#### Spirituality and the Search for Meaning as a Universal Human Quest

Every human being desires to live a meaningful life. Every human being is spiritual, expresses some form of faith, and is religious by nature. I find support for these ideas in Viktor Frankl's statement: "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life."<sup>1</sup>; in Bjorklund & Bee's writing: "The quest for meaning is a basic human characteristic... Spirituality is a common characteristic of our species... This sense of the spiritual, also known as the quest for meaning, is the self's search for ultimate knowledge of life through an individualized understanding of the sacred. Whether through the practice of traditional religion or a personal quest to find self-enlightenment, the search for meaning is an integral part of the human experience."<sup>2</sup>; in Albert Einstein's thought: "What is the meaning of life? To answer this question at all implies a religion"<sup>3</sup>; and in "Ludvig Wittgenstein's statement "To believe in God is to see that life has a meaning."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster. (p.105)

<sup>2</sup> Bjorklund, B.R. & Bee, H.L. (2008). *The journey of adulthood* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall. (p.268)

<sup>3</sup> Einstein, A. (1984). *The world as I see it*. New York: Kensington Publishing. (p. 3)

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein, L. (1960). *Tagebucher*. 1914-1916. Frankfurt a.M. (p.1914)

The real essence of this spiritual quest for meaning as the ultimate concern of human beings is called self-transcendence.<sup>5</sup> This is clearly more than simply fulfilling the need for self-actualization as constructed by Abraham Maslow. By self-transcendence I refer to a longing for something or someone beyond ourselves that we desire to give ourselves to. Viktor Frankl defined self-transcendence this way in *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (1997):

“Human existence is always directed to something, or someone, other than itself, be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter lovingly. I have termed this constitutive characteristic of human existence ‘self-transcendence.’ What is called self-actualization is ultimately an effect, the unintentional by-product, of self-transcendence.”<sup>6</sup>

“A human being is actualizing itself precisely to the extent to which he is forgetting himself and he is forgetting himself by giving himself, be it through serving a cause higher than himself or loving a person other than himself. Truly, self-transcendence is the essence of human existence.”<sup>7</sup>

Bjorklund & Bee share similar ideas with Frankl regarding the human need for self-transcendence: “Adult development brings a different perspective to life...self-transcendence, or coming to know oneself as a part of a larger whole that exists beyond the physical body and personal history.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, maturity as a human being appears to naturally lead one to seek meaning, spirituality, and something or someone beyond the self.<sup>9</sup> Naylor, Willimon & Naylor see the search for meaning as “coming to grips with what it is to be a human being who lives, loves, works, plays, suffers, and dies.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the quest for meaning in life means that one is seeking answers to the big questions of life, such as: Who am I? Why am I here? What am I supposed to do with my life? Does God exist? If so, or if not, what does that mean for my life? What is the meaning of death, especially my death? What happens after death?

My own search for meaning has taken me through early childhood and adolescent theism in the form of Methodist Christianity, with guidance offered mostly by my parents and grandparents, to a brief period of early adulthood agnosticism and atheism, guided mostly by a few friends and teachers, and I must say that while I found this worldview and lifestyle liberating, I nevertheless also felt that, for me, it was also irresponsible and self-absorbed; this then led me on a quest to understand the main beliefs of all the major world religions, which

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<sup>5</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster; Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man's search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins.

<sup>6</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man's search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins. (p.84)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>8</sup> Bjorklund, B.R. & Bee, H.L. (2008). *The journey of adulthood* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall. (p.268)

<sup>9</sup> Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.; Hamer, D. (2005). *The God gene: How faith is hard wired into our genes*. New York: Anchor Books.; Pruyser, P.W. (1976). *A dynamic psychology of religion*. New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>10</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p. 11)

eventually brought me back to theism and Christianity. I have discovered my life meaning and fulfilled my quest for genuine spirituality in and through Jesus Christ. He has called me out of my purely selfish pursuits to a life distinguished by loving God first, others second, and myself last, which is, according to Jesus, the greatest commandment of all (Luke 10:27). Far from being what Freud termed an “illusion,” or “wish fulfillment,” and “a childhood neurosis”, my faith in Christ is a daily challenge toward self-transcendence, or, as Jesus himself stated it, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me (Luke 9:23)."<sup>11</sup> This is not, for me, a simple-minded faith that is only a crutch to keep me from feeling all alone in the world. This is a challenge to die to myself every day, to live a life of sacrifice and service focused on God and the needs of other people. Jesus Christ is my ultimate concern and my primary passionate pursuit. Following him enables me to live, love, and learn and, it is my sincere hope that by following him, my life will have a positive impact on others. I share my personal experience here as primarily as an example of some key definitions of spirituality, faith and religion, which I will attend to now.

### Definitions of Spirituality, Faith and Religion

Perhaps I should provide some operational definitions for spirituality, faith, religion, and ultimate meaning. I define *spirituality* as the search or will for ultimate meaning; I see *faith* as whatever or whomever one trusts most to provide ultimate meaning; and I describe *religion* as the symbolic expression of faith through myth, story, and ritual to support ultimate meaning.<sup>12</sup> I believe that people who have similar faith tend to share similar religion.<sup>13</sup> I define *ultimate meaning* as a genuine experience of self-transcendence, which is a pursuit of something or someone to give one's life to beyond the self alone.<sup>14</sup> I also describe the spiritual desire for ultimate meaning as a person's *ultimate concern* or one's *primary passionate pursuit*.<sup>15</sup>

### Examples from Traditional World Religions and Non-Traditional 'Religions'

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<sup>11</sup> Freud, S. (1989). *The future of an illusion*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, W.F. (1997). *Attitudes toward religious values in counseling among counselor educators and counselors-in-training*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Doctoral Dissertation.; Einstein, A. (1984). *The world as I see it*. New York: Kensington Publishing.; Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.; Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster.; Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man's search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins.; Fromm, E. (1950). *Psychoanalysis and religion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.; Tillich, P. (1957). *Dynamics of faith*. New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, W.F. (1997). *Attitudes toward religious values in counseling among counselor educators and counselors in-training*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Doctoral Dissertation.

<sup>14</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster.; Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man's search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins.

<sup>15</sup> Tillich, P. (1957). *Dynamics of faith*. New York: Harper & Row; Evans, W.F. (1997). *Attitudes toward religious values in counseling among counselor educators and counselors-in-training*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Doctoral Dissertation.

Let me illustrate these definitions through the example of two traditional world religions. Please understand I am not providing all the depth and richness of these religions, only a simple model to illustrate my argument by observing certain behavioral patterns. I apologize in advance if this simplicity offends anyone in any way.

First, allow me to use Buddhism as an example of the search for meaning. The sincere Buddhist will trust in the teachings of the Buddha to provide a pathway to their discovery of meaning. The Buddhist will also follow the eightfold path on his or her quest for enlightenment. Buddhists will share similar stories and rituals as they seek to support their ultimate concern and discover their unique purpose in life.<sup>16</sup>

The faith of Islam could also serve as an example of the search for meaning. A sincere Moslem will trust in the teachings of Muhammad to direct him or her on their pathway to purpose. Moslems all over the world will seek to observe the five main pillars of their faith: praying daily, studying the Quran, giving alms, fasting, and if possible, taking at least one pilgrimage to Mecca. Moslems will share similar stories and rituals to support their faith and their desire for discovering meaning in life.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding such behavioral patterns, please allow me to also share a few non-traditional forms of the search for meaning in life. I do not mean to trivialize these experiences; rather, I use them simply as possible examples of the human will for meaning in a more non-conventional way. NASCAR is the second most popular sport in America, following professional NFL football. Many weekends each year, thousands of fans pour in to a racing stadium to cheer for their favorite driver and automotive team. Those fans who are unable to attend in person will likely watch the race on television. Fans all over America wear their favorite NASCAR apparel and share their favorite NASCAR slogans on bumper stickers. True NASCAR fans share similar stories about previous races as well as similar rituals, like tailgating, to assist them in zealously preparing for the next big race. Could this be a non-traditional form of religion?<sup>18</sup>

Duke basketball could serve as another example of this type of behavioral pattern. I know this one firsthand, as I, too was once a “Cameron Crazy,” the name given these student fanatics who share in the passion of participating in a basketball game in Cameron Indoor Stadium in Durham, North Carolina. Students often camp out for weeks in an area on campus known as Krzyzewskiville, named for their illustrious coach, Mike Krzyzewski. Notoriously, these students zealously prepare for their team’s next opponent and serve as the team’s “sixth man.” These students dress alike, share similar face-paintings, stories, songs, chants and pre-game rituals. One student even commented soon after their most recent national championship, “we

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, H. (1991). *The world’s religions*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> NASCAR (2010). <http://www.nascar.com/>

need to change to motto of this university from “Eruditio et Religio” to “Eruditio et Basketballia.”<sup>19</sup>

Certain activities within two schools of psychology, psychoanalysis and behaviorism, could also serve as examples of the religiousness of human nature. The orthodox psychoanalyst will very likely study the works of Freud, will seek to implement these ideas into personal and professional practice, and will likely read as many other psychoanalytic books and journals as possible, while also attending psychoanalytic conferences in order to share in classical Freudian stories, myths and rituals. Could these activities be, for some, a pursuit of their ultimate concern in life?<sup>20</sup>

Some behaviorists may also follow similar pursuits in following the ideas of Watson and Skinner. They, too, will most likely gather for annual conventions and conferences to share the latest discoveries that they will also seek to implement into daily personal and professional practice. Adherents will also likely share in the reading of similar journals and texts, seen for many of them as just as necessary for life and living as any sacred text might be for any traditionally religious person.<sup>21</sup>

Do any of the above mentioned human activities share similar behavioral patterns? Yes, indeed they do. That being said, some questions worth considering at this point might be, is the object of one’s faith, or one’s primary passionate pursuit, worth giving one’s life to? Is it substantial enough to see a person through the inevitable times of pain and suffering? Does such faith enhance self-transcendence, i.e., the giving of oneself to a cause greater than the self, or to a person other than oneself? Regardless as to whether the faith is defined as traditionally religious or not, these questions are worth asking. I will leave the reader here to reflect on the nature of their own ultimate concern or primary passionate pursuit.

### Key Issues

So, then, how does the study of psychology relate to the human quest for meaning? Originally, the field of psychology was defined as the study of the human soul or psyche. This meant studying that which appeared to be uniquely human: consciousness, reason, love, will. However, as Eric Fromm noted in his classic book, *Psychoanalysis and religion*, that practice was soon discarded for other goals, especially the desire for respect in the world of science:

“The tradition in which psychology was a study of the soul, concerned with man’s virtue and happiness, was abandoned. Academic psychology, trying to imitate the natural sciences and laboratory methods of weighing and counting, dealt with everything but the soul. ... Psychology thus became a science lacking its main subject matter, the soul; it was concerned with

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<sup>19</sup> Go Duke. (2010). <http://www.goduke.com/>

<sup>20</sup> Corey, G. (2001). *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.; Corsini, R.J., & Weddington, D. (2008). *Current psychotherapies*. Belmont, CA: Thomson-Brooks/Cole.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

mechanism, reaction formations, instincts, but not with the most specifically human phenomena: love, reason, conscience, values.”<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, as Viktor Frankl also noted, “A psychology that a priori shuts out meaning and reason cannot recognize the self-transcendent quality of the human reality and instead must resort to drives and instincts.”<sup>23</sup> Psychology became the study of naturalistic biochemical machines. “Whereas behaviorism, championed by such advocates as John Watson, stressed the mechanistic and overt aspects of human functioning, Freud and his followers developed a theory premised on covert intrapsychic determinism.”<sup>24</sup>

In the process of seeking to understand this biochemical human machine, psychologists have often admitted that something appears broken within human beings, something that definitely needs repairing. Yet I’ve often wondered how one flawed biochemical machine can somehow fix itself in such a way that it is then capable of fixing another flawed biochemical machine? It always seemed much like the blind leading the blind to me, which, of course, would result in both stumbling and falling (Matthew 15:14).

However, the existential approach to psychology, espoused by Frankl, Fromm, May, Yalom, and others, “rejects the deterministic view of human nature espoused by orthodox psychoanalysis and radical behaviorism. [Whereas] psychoanalysis sees freedom as restricted by unconscious forces, irrational drives, and past events; behaviorists see freedom as restricted by socio-cultural conditioning... Existential therapists...emphasize our freedom to choose what to make of our circumstances. This approach is grounded in the assumption that we are free and therefore responsible for our choices and actions... We are not victims of our circumstances; we are what we choose to be... Existential therapy is a process of searching for the value and meaning of life. The therapists’ basic task is to encourage clients to explore their options for creating a meaningful existence.”<sup>25</sup>

One school of existential psychotherapy, called logotherapy by its founder, Dr. Viktor Frankl, sought to re-humanize psychology and turn it back to the study of the human soul. Frankl believed that the essence of being human lies in searching for meaning and purpose... His life was an illustration of his theory, for he lived what his theory espoused.”<sup>26</sup> “Logotherapy aims to unlock the will to meaning and to assist the patient in seeing a meaning in his life.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Fromm, E. (1950). *Psychoanalysis and religion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (p. 6)

<sup>23</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins. (p. 132)

<sup>24</sup> Corsini, R.J., & Weddington, D. (2008). *Current psychotherapies*. Belmont, CA: Thomson-Brooks/Cole. (p. 301)

<sup>25</sup> Corey, G. (2001). *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning. (p. 143)

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>27</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins. (p. 128)

“Logotherapy is a psychotherapy centered and focused on the spiritual.”<sup>28</sup> (p.31) Logotherapy is “height psychology” as opposed to “depth psychology”.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas Sigmund Freud, in *The Future of an Illusion*, said, “religion is the universal compulsive neurosis of mankind”<sup>30</sup>, Frankl wondered, “If meanings and values really are ‘nothing but’ defense mechanisms and reaction formations, is life really worth living?”<sup>31</sup>

Now, regarding religion and its relationship to existential psychology, and more specifically, logotherapy, Frankl stated: “We have seen that there is not only a repressed and unconscious libido, but also repressed and unconscious religio”<sup>32</sup>, and “A religious sense is existent and present in each and every person, albeit buried, not to say repressed, in the unconscious.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Frankl acknowledged, “Religion provides man with more than psychotherapy ever could—but it also demands more of him.”<sup>34</sup> By this “more” he meant ultimate meaning, or what he termed, “self-transcendence.”<sup>35</sup>

I have found much consistency and very little contradiction between the study and practice of logotherapy and my own experience of faith and quest for ultimate meaning. Logotherapy has empowered me to find comfort and confidence as a Christian psychologist. I am not seeking to Christianize Frankl, however, for he espoused to be a devout person of Jewish faith throughout his life. Even so, I believe his main tenants are consistent with Christian teaching.

Indeed, as Fromm stated, “The attitude common to the teachings of the founders of all great Eastern and Western religions is one in which the supreme aim of living is a concern for man’s soul and the unfolding of his powers of love and reason. Psychoanalysis, far from being a threat to this aim, can, on the contrary, contribute a great deal to its realization.”<sup>36</sup> As a practicing psychiatrist, Magdalena Naylor wrote, “The purpose of psychotherapy is to help us become free to be aware of and experience our possibilities... Ultimately, the mission of the psychotherapist differs little from the priest—to teach us (1) how to be, (2) how to care for our soul, and (3) how to die.”<sup>37</sup> This is true to a point, with one main exception...the priest, pastor, rabbi, or religious leader almost always will bring in to focus one’s relationship with God, or should, I think, whereas the psychiatrist is free to leave God out, and often does. How one can study the human

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>29</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins.; Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man’s search for meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>30</sup> Freud, S. (1989). *The future of an illusion*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. (p. 69)

<sup>31</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins. (p. 105)

<sup>32</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins. (p. 55)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Fromm, E. (1950). *Psychoanalysis and religion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (p. 99)

<sup>37</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p.186-187)

soul without addressing a person's spiritual world view would seem to me, at best, a daunting task.

### Philosophical Foundations for Life Meaning

Frankl espoused three philosophical foundations: (1) freedom of will; (2) will to meaning; and (3) meaning in life. As to freedom of will—Frankl often stated that human beings had the ability to choose at any moment who we will be, and that we needed to take responsibility for our lives. “Between stimulus and response, there is a space, and in that space is our ability to choose our response.”<sup>38</sup> As for the will to meaning, Frankl believed this to be the primary motivation and the deepest longing of every human being, as stated earlier. Regarding meaning in life, he believed that meaning could be found, and that it was the responsibility of every human being to seek this meaning. He did not believe the psychotherapist could give meaning to any individual, but the therapist could, and should, convince the client that there is a meaning to be found. Please note that while Frankl believed these maxims to be absolute truths about human life, he also saw the fulfillment of each as relative to a person's unique discoveries, creations and experiences.<sup>39</sup>

### The Necessary Conditions for Meaning in Life

In addition to these three philosophical foundations, Frankl also believed there are three necessary conditions for meaning in life. According to logotherapy, human beings “discover this meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone, and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering<sup>40</sup>, in other words, by “the deeds done, the loves loved, and last but not least, the sufferings they have gone through with courage and dignity.”<sup>41</sup>

As to love, is it possible to live a meaningful life without at least one genuine loving relationship with another person? I cannot imagine it. “Love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire,” wrote Frankl.<sup>42</sup> “Life without love would be nothing.”<sup>43</sup> “To have only ourselves to love, to have no greater project in life than ourselves, is surely the very depths of meaninglessness.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Vesely, A. (2010). Viktor Frankl Institute Video Archives. <http://logotherapy.univie.ac.at/e/clipgallery>

<sup>39</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man's search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins.; Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>40</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster. (p. 115)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>42</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster. (p. 49)

<sup>43</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p.99)

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

As for work—it appears to me that the giving of ourselves to some cause or project that utilizes our best skills and abilities to make some positive difference in the world is certainly a great human need. And yet, “The number of people who enjoy their work and find it truly meaningful are a minority in the population.”<sup>45</sup>

I consider myself a very fortunate person to work in an academic environment where the mission statement reads, “We are a community committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives.”<sup>46</sup> This mission gives me the freedom and the responsibility to create and facilitate a learning environment that enables me to work meaningfully. I genuinely love my work as a professor of psychology, and my goal is to influence people in this learning community in such a way that, together, we fulfill the mission statement of our university.

As for suffering with courage and dignity, I believe it is taking an unalterable fate and allowing it to make us a stronger, wiser, and more compassionate human being. No one needs to invite suffering, as it seems to be a commonality among all human beings - more for some, of course, than for others. “If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death.”<sup>47</sup> “No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden.”<sup>48</sup> “It is possible to say ‘yes to life’ in spite of all the tragic aspects of human existence.”<sup>49</sup> Each person, then, will have the choice as to what to make of his or her unique suffering. One may become a bitter person, a victim, or one may become a better person, a victor, more capable than ever before of compassionate understanding toward other people in their times of pain and suffering.

### The Effects of Low Meaning

Regarding the state of the human quest for meaning, Frankl stated, “Today, man’s will to meaning is frustrated on a worldwide scale. Ever more people are haunted by a feeling of meaninglessness which is often accompanied by a feeling of emptiness—as I am used to calling it, an existential vacuum. It mainly manifests itself in boredom and apathy. While boredom is indicative of a loss of interest in the world, apathy betrays a lack of initiative to do something in the world, to change something in the world.”<sup>50</sup>

Erich Fromm once stated, “we are a society of notoriously unhappy people: lonely, anxious, depressed, destructive, dependent—people who are glad when we have killed the time we are

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<sup>45</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p. 158)

<sup>46</sup> JMU Mission Statement. (2010). <http://www.jmu.edu/planning/mission>

<sup>47</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man’s search for meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster. (p. 76)

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins. (p. 139)

trying so hard to save.”<sup>51</sup> “Man is a being in search of meaning,” wrote Frankl, and... “Today his search is unsatisfied and this constitutes the pathology of our age.”<sup>52</sup> So, what are the effects of this lack of meaning? Frankl called this the “the existential vacuum, defined as “a feeling of emptiness or meaninglessness” has three facets: depression, aggression, addiction.”<sup>53</sup>

Regarding depression, many studies have demonstrated a significant negative correlation between life meaning and depression<sup>54</sup>, including my own research, which has shown a significant negative correlation between the Purpose in Life (PIL) scale and Beck Depression Inventory, ( $r(184) = -.61, p < .001$ ).<sup>55</sup> Frankl noted that “depression often results in suicide.”<sup>56</sup> For youth between the ages of 10 and 24, suicide is the third leading cause of death.<sup>57</sup> In my research, I have also discovered a clear negative correlation between purpose in life, as measured by the PIL, with both suicidal thoughts ( $r(183) = -.25, p < .01$ ) and suicidal attempts ( $r(180) = -.21, p < .01$ ).<sup>58</sup> Without a clear reason to live, it seems many cannot cope with all the difficulties and pain life can inflict.

As to addiction, empirical research has also noted the prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse among those who measure low on life meaning.<sup>59</sup> I have recently conducted research supporting these claims, measuring strong negative correlations between Purpose in Life and negative consequences of excessive alcohol use, measured by an adapted CORE Alcohol Survey, such as *regret* ( $r(184) = -.15, p < .05$ ) and *unsuccessful attempts to stop drinking* ( $r(184) = -.19, p < .05$ ).<sup>60</sup> Frankl observed that in one study, “90% of alcoholics looked upon their existence as meaningless and without purpose.”<sup>61</sup> According to a recent Alcohol-Related Disease Impact tool, “from 2001–2005, there were approximately 79,000 deaths annually attributable to excessive alcohol use. In fact, excessive alcohol use is the 3rd leading lifestyle-related cause of death for people in the United States each year.”<sup>62</sup> As Naylor, et al. recognized, “People take drugs because they are alienated and powerless and have no sense of meaning in their lives.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Erich Fromm (1996). *To have or to be*. New York: Continuum. (p. 5-6)

<sup>52</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins. (p. 112)

<sup>53</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man’s search for meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster. (p. 143)

<sup>54</sup> Batthyany, A. & Guttman, D. (2005). *Empirical research on logotherapy and meaning-oriented psychotherapy*. Phoenix, Arizona: Zeig, Tucker & Theisen, Inc.

<sup>55</sup> Evans, W.F., Kibler, E.J., Jenkins, J., Garafalo, A., Girard, J., Moon, M., Goodpasture, A. (2010a/In Process). *Alcohol use and life meaning among college students*. Submitted to *Journal of American College Health*.

<sup>56</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins. (p. 99)

<sup>57</sup> Center for Disease Control. (2010). [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

<sup>58</sup> Evans, W.F., Kibler, E.J., Jenkins, J., Garafalo, A., Girard, J., Moon, M., Goodpasture, A. (2010a/In Process). *Alcohol use and life meaning among college students*. Submitted to *Journal of American College Health*.

<sup>59</sup> Batthyany, A. & Guttman, D. (2005). *Empirical research on logotherapy and meaning-oriented psychotherapy*. Phoenix, Arizona: Zeig, Tucker & Theisen, Inc.

<sup>60</sup> Evans, W.F., Kibler, E.J., Jenkins, J., Garafalo, A., Girard, J., Moon, M., Goodpasture, A. (2010a/In Process). *Alcohol use and life meaning among college students*. Submitted to *Journal of American College Health*.

<sup>61</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins. (p. 102)

<sup>62</sup> Center for Disease Control. (2010). [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

<sup>63</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p. 65)

As for aggression, Frankl's wrote "people are most likely to become aggressive when they are caught in this feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness."<sup>64</sup> "Drug abuse and violent crime are among the most destructive ways in which Americans deal with alienation and separation." Naylor and associates report, "Homicide is the 6<sup>th</sup> leading cause of premature death in the United States, occurring at a rate of 4.4 times higher than in the next most violent Western industrialized nation."<sup>65</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control, "Violence is a serious public health problem in the United States. In 2006, more than 18,000 people were victims of homicide and more than 33,000 took their own life."<sup>66</sup> Without a revealed life meaning, it appears that many individuals may lapse into bitterness and victimization, resulting in depression, addiction and aggression a consequence of the existential vacuum.

### Religion and Health

So, where does religion fit into this journey towards life meaning? In my own research, I have discovered very strong support of a positive relationship between purpose in life, as measured by the PIL, and religiosity, as measured by the Gorsuch and McPherson Universal Intrinsic Extrinsic Religiosity Scale ( $r(294) = .18, p < .01$ ).<sup>67</sup> Can religion also bring health, positive growth to become a better person, even a sense of victory over pain and suffering? Physician and researcher, Harold Koenig of Duke University, has discovered many positive health factors of intrinsic religiosity in his research. I now refer you to the chart compiled from his book, *The Healing Power of Faith*.<sup>68</sup> [See Appendix A] As this chart demonstrates, intrinsic religion improves both mental and physical health, as measured by such factors as a stable autonomic nervous system, the level of stress hormones, and a healthy immune system. Koenig also found that intrinsic religion reduced rates of suicide, cancer, heart disease, and strokes.

Other studies have verified similar results. "There have been consistent and robust findings that people who attend religious services live longer than people who do not." A number of studies have suggested that "most religions promote healthy behavior, provide social support, teach coping skills, and promote positive emotions."<sup>69</sup> Tartaro, Luecken & Gunn also found that participants who scored high on religiosity and spirituality also showed lower levels of cortisol response to stress. Cortisol is a hormone released as part of the stress response and is related to decreases in immune system functioning. Two particular areas were discovered to be strongly

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<sup>64</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man's search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins. (p. 104)

<sup>65</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p. 63)

<sup>66</sup> Center for Disease Control. (2010). [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

<sup>67</sup> Evans, W.F., Forde, E., Atwood, K., Edwards, C. (2010b/In Process). *Meaning, religiosity and death anxiety*. Submitted to *Omega Journal*.

<sup>68</sup> Koenig, H. (1999). *The healing power of faith*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>69</sup> McCullough, M.E., Hoyt, W.T., Larson, D.B., Koenig, H.G. & Thoresen, C.E. (2000). Religious involvement and mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Health Psychology, 19*, 211-222. ; Tartaro, J., Luecken, L.J. & Gunn, H.E. (2005). Exploring heart and soul: Effects of religiosity/spirituality, and gender on cortisol and cardiovascular stress responses. *Journal of Health Psychology, 10*, 753-766.

associated with this cortisol response—forgiveness and prayer, in other words, forgiveness and prayer seem to serve to protect individuals from the damaging effects of stress.<sup>70</sup>

### The Life Matrix and Different States of Meaning

Naylor, Willimon & Naylor created a “Life Matrix” to demonstrate differences among people as four distinct states of meaning: “meaninglessness, separation, having, and being.”<sup>71</sup> [See Appendix B] Meaninglessness, of course, denotes the least healthy state of meaning, whereas being signifies the healthiest state of meaning. “Nihilism, they write, is “absolute meaninglessness”<sup>72</sup> “It is meaningless that we are born; it is meaningless that we die,” wrote Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>73</sup> Meaningless leads to despair, which, as we have seen, often results in depression, addiction, or aggression.

The next state of meaning is “separation.” “Meaning often eludes those who are separated from themselves, from others, and from the center of their being.”<sup>74</sup> “Separation is threefold,” wrote theologian and philosopher, Paul Tillich; “there is separation among individual lives, separation of a man from himself, and separation of all men from the Ground of Being.”<sup>75</sup> Separation brings a longing for connectedness, but a reality of detachment, usually resulting in anxiety.

The third category of meaning is “having.” In the having state of meaning, people measure their success or failure for attaining meaning by what they have, or by what they do. ‘Been there, done that,’ is the commonly expressed saying. The authors note: “We are a nation obsessed with having and consuming people and things... we are in fact a nation of super individuals and hedonists masked as Baptists, Catholics, Methodists and Jews.”<sup>76</sup> Our individualistic, materialistic, narcissistic culture tells us: “The harder you work, the more money you will have. The more money you have, the more you can buy, and the happier you will be.”<sup>77</sup> Yet, as Fromm wrote, “If I am what I have and what I have is lost, who then am I?”<sup>78</sup>

The last category of meaning is “being.” In its essence, “Life is about being. To live is to be.”<sup>79</sup> “The courage to be as oneself is the courage to make of oneself what one wants to be.”<sup>80</sup> “Being involves caring, loving, sharing, and participating in community with others.”<sup>81</sup> “The

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<sup>70</sup> Tartaro, J., Luecken, L.J. & Gunn, H.E. (2005). Exploring heart and soul: Effects of religiosity/spirituality, and gender on cortisol and cardiovascular stress responses. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 10, 753-766.

<sup>71</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p. 17)

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>73</sup> Sartre, J.P. (1965). Questions about the meaning of life,” *Religious Studies* 1, 125-140. (p. 125)

<sup>74</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p. 55)

<sup>75</sup> Tillich, P. (1948). *The shaking of the foundations*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons. (p. 156-157)

<sup>76</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p. 72)

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>78</sup> Fromm, E. (2005) *To Have or To Be*. New York: Continuum Press. (p. 96)

<sup>79</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p. 93)

<sup>80</sup> Tillich, P. (2000). *The courage to be*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (p. 9)

<sup>81</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p. 214)

whole purpose of psychotherapy is to teach the patient how to be.”<sup>82</sup> Of course, it all returns to a discovery of the essence of being, or as Martin Heidegger wrote, “God is not one thing among others, but being itself, or Being.”<sup>83</sup>

Regarding the “spiritual” effect of the life matrix, what I have discovered in my years as a chaplain, pastor, counselor and professor is this: it really does not seem to matter whether one is a theist or an atheist regarding where one might actually be in their “state” of meaning making. In other words, I have encountered theists in each category, some feeling completely disengaged from the God they believe in; some sensing they are detached or separated because of their sin and guilt; some clearly in orthodoxy, believing they ‘have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me, God;’ and some who are also clearly in quest mode. I have also experienced atheists who are, at one time or another, either disengaged, detached, orthodox, as in having ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me, me,’ and also in the quest stage of being. Certainly, regarding the spiritual domain in the search for ultimate meaning, the person who is still seeking, exploring, and growing, all the while respecting where others might be in their own quest, is the healthiest response of all.

### Healthy and Unhealthy Religiosity

I have also created a chart comparing healthy and unhealthy religiosity, which, while not verified empirically, has been validated experientially in thirty years of ministry as a pastor and military chaplain, along with seventeen years of university teaching and counseling with many individuals, couples and families. [See Appendix C] As you can see, on one side are words expressing unhealthy religiosity, such as narcissistic, guilt-inducing, shaming, controlling, manipulating, closed mindedness and closed systems. On the other side are words describing healthy religiosity, such as altruistic, accepting, loving, forgiving, open mindedness and open systems.

As an example of the unhealthy side of religiosity, I once saw a young couple in their mid-thirties for marriage counseling. Both of them professed to be conservative Christians, and yet the woman was ready to leave her husband on the grounds of physical and emotional abuse. As I soon discovered, she had been a battered wife for years. She had not left him because she was convinced that divorce was absolutely wrong and she would go to hell if she left him. He, on the other hand, confessed to beating her, in his words, “whenever she fails to submit to my authority.”<sup>84</sup> When I asked about the love, acceptance and grace of Jesus, he remarked, “oh I believe in all that, but right now, she needs to learn how to respect my authority.” The man was as self-absorbed as any client I had ever worked with. Finally, after three more sessions, she found the strength and support she needed to leave him and move into a shelter for battered

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>83</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins. (p. 147).

<sup>84</sup> Personal communication, 1993

women. I saw her for several more sessions, individually, rather than as a couple. Her healing had begun, as she said, “I feel alive again for the first time in nearly 10 years.”<sup>85</sup>

Regarding healthy religiosity, I had been seeing a young married woman in her late twenties for several sessions when she suddenly shared that she had been sexually abused by her father when she was a child and teenager. This had never been shared with anyone before, she stated, but now it was keeping her from enjoying sex with her husband. She felt she needed to confront her father in order to move on with her life. We agreed to invite both her father and mother to the next session, and they both agreed to come. Almost immediately she burst into tears while exclaiming, “You raped me, Dad! Many times!” The pain in the room was excruciating. In a matter of minutes, dad confessed that it was true, to the total dismay of his wife, who immediately stated she wanted a divorce. And then, through her tears, the young woman walked over to her dad and mom, reached for their hands, and said, “Still, I forgive you, Dad, and I love you and Mom, and I beg you to stay together.” As tears flowed from everyone in the room, a journey of healing began for a daughter and her parents, initiated by love, forgiveness and reconciliation, which was grounded in solid faith. After four more sessions, the family was still intact and the woman stated that her sex life with her husband had improved dramatically.<sup>86</sup>

#### A Holistic Health Assessment and Intervention Tool

In 1997, I created a holistic-integrative method of assessment and intervention for counselors.<sup>87</sup> [See Appendix D] The Sea-Star Holistic-Health Model and the exercise associated with it, provides a relatively easy method for assessing the overall health of clients. The results also empower the therapeutic relationship with possible intervention strategies. This holistic-integrative model enables the counselor to gain valuable information about the client in five domains: physical, emotional, relational, mental, and spiritual. After the client assigns themselves a score between 1-10, with one being low health and 10 being optimal health, the client then offers what they might need to change to move more toward greater health in each area, again stating as a personal goal a number between 1-10. Clients are then invited to create an action plan stating specifically what they will need to do, or stop doing, in order to move to a healthier place in each domain. The instrument has proven helpful in assisting counselors with both assessment and intervention information from the client, and it brings out into the open the often neglected area of spirituality in a therapeutic environment.

#### Transitions for Psychology and Religion

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Personal communication, 1994

<sup>87</sup> Evans, W.F. (1997). Attitudes toward religious values in counseling among counselor educators and counselors-in-training. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Doctoral Dissertation.; Evans, W.F. (2005). “A holistic-integrative method of assessment and intervention.” *The Virginia Counselors Journal*, Vol.28, p.56-58.; Warner, M.J. & Evans, W.F. (2006). *Inspiring leadership: It’s not about the power*. Boston: Pearson Publishing.; Echterling, L., Evans, W., Cowan, E., Staton, R., Stewart, A., Presbury, J., & McKee, E. (2007). *Thriving! A manual for the helping professions*. (2nd Ed.). Boston: Lahaska/Houghton Mifflin Publishing, Inc.

Most of us, most of the time, know at some level that there is more to life than what we have experienced thus far. Religious experience and expression is an important way of discovering life meaning and the ‘more’ we are longing for. As Naylor and associates described it, “More is going on is us and in our world than can be circumscribed by naturalistic explanations. There is always more. The primary way for human beings to accept, to describe, to stand in awe of, to plead with, to rage against, make peace with that more-than-we-can-know-or-understand is called religion.”<sup>88</sup> “Through religion, even the most ordinary aspects of life are given new and deeper significance. We come to believe that our little lives are caught up in some larger purpose, that the world is more than cause-and-effect determinism.”<sup>89</sup>

Schneider has written of the “rediscovery of awe,” referring to our fundamental relationship to mystery.<sup>90</sup> He calls for a holistic, integrative approach in psychology that seeks to integrate existential, psychodynamic, relational, and spiritual spheres of inquiry. I wholeheartedly agree!

### Conclusion

In conclusion, let me restate some key points. For clarification, I will describe these key points as needs. First, all human beings appear to need some type of faith, are on a spiritual quest and are religious by nature; many are certainly consciously and overtly religious, while some are unconsciously or covertly religious. Also, every human being aspires to live well and meaningfully. Second, we need to pursue holistic health in both the study of religion and in the study of psychology. By this I mean that we need to ask ourselves constantly and consistently, in both fields of inquiry, ‘will this enhance life; will it empower one to make a positive difference in the world; will this foster healthy human relationships; and will it enable one to suffer with courage and dignity?’ Third, there is no need to either deitize or demonize either field of study—deitization and demonization are extreme positions that are counterproductive, unhelpful and unhealthy. Psychology can help us understand the nature of human nature, including the human need for meaning in life. Religion can help us understand something of the nature of God as well as the human longing for God and ultimate meaning. Fourth, there is a need for more religious sensitivity and understanding in the study of psychology and more psychological sensitivity and understanding in the study of religion—in other words, let us learn to honor both the religious and psychological quest for truth, a pursuit of the best we can know that leads us to the highest aspirations of humankind, i.e., height psychology and religiosity, or self transcendence.

Charles Darwin, after a lifetime devoted to his work, wrote that if he had his life to live over again, he would read a little poetry every day and listen to music at least weekly. He stated, “My mind seems to have become a machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of

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<sup>88</sup> Naylor, T., Willimon, W., & Naylor, M. (1994). *The search for meaning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. (p. 201)

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>90</sup> Schneider, K.J. (2004). *Rediscovery of awe*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon Press.; Schneider, K.J. (2007). *Existential-integrative psychotherapy: Guideposts to the core of practice*. New York: Routledge.

facts...the loss of these emotional tastes is a loss of happiness... the erosion of higher sensibilities may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more possibly to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.”<sup>91</sup>

Darwin appeared to realize a human longing for something more in life. Albert Einstein also seemed to recognize a human need for meaning in life when he wrote, “The man who regards his own life and that of his fellow creatures as meaningless is not merely unfortunate but almost disqualified for life.”<sup>92</sup>

So, is life to be defined, as Shakespeare does in *Macbeth*, act 5, scene 4:

“Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard of no more;

It is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.”<sup>93</sup>

Or, is it more as Frederick Buechner defined it in his autobiography, *Now and Then*:

“Listen to your life; see it for the fathomless mystery that it is:

In the boredom and pain of it no less than the excitement and gladness.

Touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it,

For in the last analysis, all moments are key moments,

And life itself is grace.”<sup>94</sup>

What I am hoping, and indeed praying for, and not only for myself, but also for everyone, is: life, as opposed to death or destruction; love, as opposed to apathy or antagonism; light, as opposed to darkness or despair.<sup>95</sup> This is what I challenge the fields of religion and psychology to seek, above all. This is what I encourage us all to seek, as our ultimate concern, as our primary passionate pursuit. My sincerest hope is that, with the best and highest that can be known

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<sup>91</sup> Darwin, C. (1897). *The life and letters of Charles Darwin*. New York: Appleton & Co. (p. 81-82)

<sup>92</sup> Einstein, A. (1984). *The world as I see it*. New York: Kensington Publishing. (p. 3)

<sup>93</sup> Shakespeare, W. (2005). *The Oxford Shakespeare: The complete works*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

<sup>94</sup> Buechner, F. (1991). *Now and then: A memoir of vocation*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.

<sup>95</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1997). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Harper Collins.; Frankl, V.E. (1984). *Man’s search for meaning*. New York: Simon & Schuster.; Lewis, C.S. (1970). *God in the dock*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing.; Lewis, C.S. (1996). *The abolition of man*. New York: Simon & Schuster.; Smith, H. (2001). *Why religion matters*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.

through the study of religion and psychology, we will all grow to see that life, lived well and meaningfully, is a precious, fragile gift, meant to be treasured.

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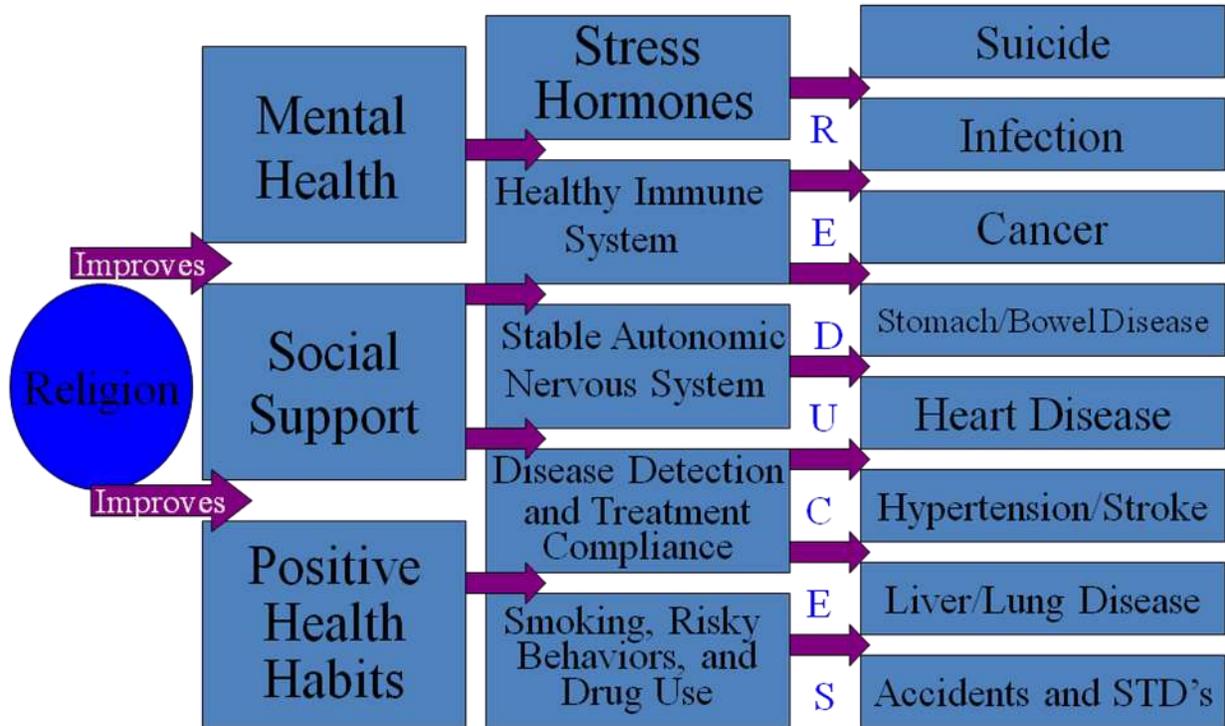
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Appendix A

# Is Religion Good for Your Health?

Design by: Harold Koenig, 1999



Appendix B

# Life Matrix

## (Naylor, Willimon, & Naylor, 1994)

States:	Meaninglessness	Separation	Having/ <b>Doing</b>	Being
Effects:				
1. Spiritual	Despair	Detachment	Orthodoxy	Quest
2. Mental	Nihilism	Alienation	Hedonism	Growth
3. Emotional	Depression	Anxiety	Narcissism	Balance
4. Physical	Death	Somatization	Health Fetishism	Homeostasis
5. <b>Relational</b>	<b>Disengagement</b>	<b>Detachment</b>	<b>Usefulness</b>	<b>Solitude/ Intimacy/ Community</b>

[\* Red type denotes author's additions to the original text]

Appendix C

# Unhealthy and Healthy Religiosity

(Evans, 1997)



Narcissistic

Guilt Inducing

Blaming/Shaming

Controlling/Manipulating

Closed Minded

Closed Systems

Altruistic

Accepting/Forgiving

Honoring/Respecting

Loving /Valuing

Open Minded

Open Systems

Appendix D

## *Sea Star Exercise*

Physical  
A. \_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_

Mental  
A. \_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_

Emotional  
A. \_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_

Relational  
A. \_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_

Spiritual  
A. \_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_

A. Assess your current health in each of these five dimensions using a scale of 1-10, with lower scores signifying less health and higher scores signifying optimal health. Use your own definition of health for each dimension. How would you describe your overall health at this time?

B. How would you like to score yourself 1 month, 3 months, 6 months, or a year from now? What needs to happen for you to move from your present score to this healthier score? Write this down in specific steps on the back of this page. You probably have more resources and capabilities than you realize. Now, please share your results with someone so they can help you along your health journey. Live well!

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