The Psychology of Spiritual Struggle
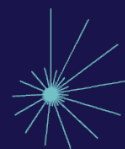
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Table of Contents

I. Introduction

Spirituality is a vital source of comfort, guidance, and hope for many people over the course of their lives. At times, however, the life journey can become more difficult; twists, turns, and unexpected pitfalls and obstacles lead to distress and disorientation. During these periods, spirituality can add to the confusion, and what was once a resource for support may become a source of tension, conflict, and struggle. Scientific study during the last thirty years points to the importance of spiritual struggles for health and well-being. Spiritual struggles appear to be pivotal experiences that can shape the trajectory of our lives; they may lead to wholeness and growth, brokenness and decline, or sometimes both growth and decline. In this report, we discuss what we have learned about spiritual struggles from this exciting new literature. We highlight studies that we have conducted independently and in collaboration with each other, much of which has been supported by the John Templeton Foundation. Readers interested in a more extensive discussion of this knowledge base can read Pargament and Exline's (in press) forthcoming book, *Working with Spiritual Struggles in Psychotherapy: From Research to Practice*.

II. What Are Spiritual Struggles?

Struggles are a part of life. We struggle with many things: the struggle to get out of bed, the struggle to lose weight, the struggle to get along with difficult people. Spiritual struggles are among the deepest of all conflicts. They can shake us to our core, raising fundamental questions about the beliefs, values, practices, and reasons for living that lend balance and direction to our lives. Who am I? Why am I here? How should I live my life? Is the world a safe and trustworthy place? Am I loved? Am I a good person? What is true? How can I make sense of suffering and loss? These basic existential questions are not necessarily linked to sacred matters, but they often are imbued with sacred power and significance, and when that takes place, they become spiritual struggles.

We define spiritual struggles as "experiences of tension, conflict, or strain that center on whatever people view as sacred" (Pargament & Exline, in press, p. 5). People can struggle with the sacred in any of the forms it may take. Broadly speaking, we can identify three domains of spiritual struggle. Supernatural struggles involve tensions with perceptions of higher powers (e.g., God or gods), or demonic or evil forces. Intrapsychic struggles manifest themselves through conflicts within oneself over moral issues, questions of ultimate meaning, and doubts about the truth of religious beliefs. And interpersonal struggles are experienced as strains with other people or institutions about spiritual matters.

Researchers have developed ways to measure spiritual struggles. Most often used has been the negative religious coping subscale of the Brief RCOPE, which is weighted toward supernatural struggles (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998) and the Religious Strain subscale of the Religious Comfort

and Strain Scale that assesses alienation from God, fear and guilt, and religious rifts with other people (Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000). Other researchers have done work on closely related concepts, such as spiritual distress (King, Fitchett, Murphy, Pargament, Harrison, & Loggers, 2017), moral injury (Jinkerson, 2016), religious crisis (Piedmont, 2012), and spiritual pain (Delgado-Guay et al., 2011).

In an important development, Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, and Yali (2014) created a more comprehensive and standardized measure of spiritual struggles. The Religious and Spiritual Struggles (RSS) scale assesses six types of spiritual struggle that reflect the three broad domains: supernatural, intrapsychic, and interpersonal. The more recently developed RSS-14 (Exline, Pargament, et al., 2021) is a shorter scale that taps these same dimensions.

1. *Divine struggles* are manifested by feelings of anger or disappointment with God, and feeling punished, abandoned, or unloved by God.
2. *Demonic struggles* take the form of worries that problems are caused by the devil or evil spirits, and feelings of being attacked or tormented by the devil.
3. *Struggles with doubt* are experienced as feelings of confusion about religious/spiritual beliefs and being troubled by questions about religion/spirituality.
4. *Moral struggles* are marked by tension and guilt about not living up to one's higher standards and wrestling with attempts to follow moral principles.
5. *Struggles of ultimate meaning* reflect questions about whether one's life has a deeper meaning and whether life really matters.
6. *Interpersonal spiritual struggles* involve conflicts with other people and institutions about sacred issues, for example, anger at organized religion and feeling hurt, mistreated, or offended by others in relation to religious or spiritual issues.

In their factor analysis of the RSS, Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, and Yali (2014) found support for the distinctiveness of these six types of spiritual struggle, although they also found that the forms of spiritual struggle were moderately intercorrelated. This indicates that people who experience one type of spiritual struggle are also more likely to encounter the other types of struggles. These findings show that we can talk about spiritual struggles both as a group and in their more specific forms. The first half of this report will focus on what we know about spiritual struggles as a group, and the second half will zero in on what we know about each of the six types of spiritual struggle.

Spiritual struggles vary not only in their type, but in other ways as well. Some spiritual struggles are short-lived experiences. In his book, *A Grief Observed*, noted Christian writer C. S. Lewis (1961) described the anger he felt toward God one evening after the death of his wife. "Time after time, when He seemed most gracious He was really preparing the next torture" (p. 27). By the next morning, however, his anger had dissipated. "I wrote that last night. It was a yell rather than a thought" (p. 27). Other spiritual struggles can be quite unsettling and last for a considerably longer time. In this vein, a survey of brown marrow transplant survivors indicated that 30 percent continued to experience some degree of spiritual struggles up to 33 years later (King et al., 2018).

These struggles can be intense in some cases. Joan Chittister (2003) described the deep pain that accompanied her spiritual struggle when her religious order denied her long-held dream of pursuing a master's degree in writing at a prestigious school: "The frustration of it swept over me like waves on a beach, pulling me under, upending me in deep water, washing me out away from a firm emotional shore. Day after day, the struggle raged" (p. 91). Not all struggles are this intense, but for most people they are a source of distress and disorientation, as we will discuss shortly.

For some, spiritual struggles are singular experiences not to be repeated later in life. Other people may encounter different episodes of spiritual struggle over the course of their lives. In his classic book *Night*, Elie Wiesel (1972) recounts the struggles with God he experienced as an adolescent immersed in the immense cruelty and suffering of Auschwitz. He asks: "How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnace? (p. 85). Wiesel went on win the Nobel Prize for his lifelong commitment and contributions to humanity and a better world. And yet, he was not spared further spiritual struggles. At the age of 82, he went through life-threatening heart-bypass surgery. In the process of recovery, he experiences spiritual questions and doubts once again. "Evidently, I have prayed poorly, lacking concentration and fervor; otherwise, why would the Lord, by definition just and merciful, punish me in this way?" (Wiesel, 2012, p. 14). In short, as we move closer to spiritual struggles, we see that they are experienced and expressed in a variety of ways.

III. How Commonplace Are Spiritual Struggles?

Spiritual struggles are not at all unusual. In fact, they are essential parts of the narratives of key figures from the world's great religious traditions. In the Hebrew Bible, for instance, Job, a good man and a model of innocence, experiences a series of cataclysmic losses that lead him to raise a series of pointed questions to God: "Does it seem good to You that You should oppress, You should despise the work of Your hands, And smile on the counsel of the wicked?" (Job 10:4). In the New Testament, in his last dying moments on the cross, Jesus voices a final plea of anguish and abandonment to God: "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Within Buddhism, before he can become the Buddha and experience enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama must struggle to overcome the worldly temptations offered by the devil, Mara—the feelings of fear and rage, lust, and pride.

The great literature of the world is also filled with accounts of spiritual struggle. Written at least 1,000 years ago, the oldest long poem in Old English, *Beowulf,* presents the epic struggles between the King of the Geats, Beowulf, and an assortment of demons, dragons, and beasts. Dostoevsky's classic novel, *Crime and Punishment*, centers on the moral and spiritual struggle of the protagonist, Rodion Raskolnikov, after he commits two murders. Thornton Wilder's novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*,

wrestles with the question of how ultimate meaning can be found in a precarious world in which a bridge suddenly collapses, killing five innocent people.

Famous people, past and present, have also experienced spiritual struggles. In the early 17th century, Galileo challenged the "geocentric" view of the Catholic Church that the sun revolved around the earth, concluding instead that the earth revolved around the sun. This resulted in a decade of struggle with the Church, leading ultimately to a trial, Galileo's conviction for heresy, and imprisonment in his house for the rest of his life (Finocchiaro, 1989). Prior to the development of his theory of evolution, Charles Darwin was an orthodox Christian. Following his experience of personal losses, including the death of his daughter, and his growing understanding of the natural world, Darwin developed profound religious doubts and ultimately lost his belief in a personal God (Pleins, 2013). George Harrison, guitarist for the Beatles, experienced a spiritual crisis and struggle when he found that his fame, success, and involvement in drugs and sex left him with feelings of emptiness rather than fulfillment. Ultimately, his spiritual struggle led him to a visit to India, a fascination with Hinduism, and a spiritual transformation in his music and lifestyle (Greene, 2007).

Surveys indicate that spiritual struggles are relatively commonplace in the general population. In a large survey of U.S. community and college students, one-third said that they had encountered a spiritual struggle in the last few months (Exline, Pargament, & Grubbs, 2014). A larger percentage of people, approximately 75 percent, reportedly experienced a spiritual struggle at some time in their lives (Exline, Pargament, & Grubbs, 2014). Given the guilt and shame that may accompany spiritual struggles, many people may feel some reluctance to admit to themselves or others that they are undergoing these tensions and conflicts (Exline, Kaplan, & Grubbs, 2012). Thus, these estimates of the frequency of struggles, high as they are, may be underestimates.

Spiritual struggles are not restricted to any particular group; they can be found among people of diverse age, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and cultural background (see Pargament & Exline, in press). Individuals facing challenging life circumstances—illness, mental health problems, major life stressors—may be especially prone to spiritual struggles. Consider just a few examples. In one study of older adults with advanced cancer, 58 percent reported some level of spiritual struggle (Winkelman et al., 2011). Rosmarin, Malloy, and Forester (2014) found that about half of their sample of outpatients being treated for a mood disorder manifested spiritual struggles. And according to a study of military veterans, one-third reported that they were facing at least one spiritual struggle (Currier, Foster, et al., 2018).

People from diverse religious backgrounds and orientations also experience spiritual struggles, including Muslims (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Exline, & Agbaria, 2015), Hindus (Tarakeshwar, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2003), Buddhists (Phillips et al., 2009), Jews (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Weissberger, & Exline, 2016), and the nonaffiliated and "spiritual but not religious" (Mercadante, 2020). Although it may seem counterintuitive, many atheists also report spiritual struggles, particularly interpersonal spiritual struggles, moral struggles, and struggles of ultimate meaning (Sedlar et al.,

2018). Even those who do not believe in God can and at times do experience negative emotions around the idea of God, as studies by Bradley and colleagues (2015, 2017, and 2018) have shown.

Thus, even though spiritual struggles have not received a great deal of attention in the literature until recently, they can be found in the stories of people past and present, ordinary and extraordinary, and among individuals who come from all walks of life. They are, in short, a common part of human experience.

Back to Table of Contents

IV. What Causes Spiritual Struggles?

Spiritual struggles are rooted in the human search for significance (for more extensive discussion, see Pargament & Exline, in press). We are intentional beings who seek purpose and significance in our lives, as many eminent theorists from Gordon Allport (1950) to Viktor Frankl (1959) have emphasized. In this process, people are guided by an orienting system of beliefs, practices, experiences, and personality characteristics, as well as a larger network of social relationships and institutions that offer direction and stability. Spirituality can be embedded in both the purposes we seek in life and the orienting system that guides us toward our destinations. At times, the search for purpose and meaning is less than smooth and straightforward. Over the course of life, people can be shaken by internal changes and external events that shake them to the core, raising serious questions about their ultimate purposes in life and their most basic beliefs, practices, and values. These are times of spiritual struggle. Difficult though they may be, these struggles are not signs of pathology or immaturity; they are instead a natural part of the developmental process, an outgrowth of life itself.

With this perspective in mind, we can identify three general sources of spiritual struggle: the purposes people seek out of life, their orienting systems, and the life events and transitions they encounter (see Figure 1 for a framework for understanding spiritual struggles).

Significant purpose as a source of spiritual struggle. It makes a great deal of difference what people strive for, and among these possible significant purposes, sacred pursuits are especially powerful (Emmons, 1999). We can think of them as missions, vocations, or destinies. In any case, they often serve as overarching sources of identity, coherence, and direction. Having a sacred purpose in life can help people sustain themselves through life's ordinary ups and downs and greatest upheavals. As Friedrich Nietzche famously said, "He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how" (cited in Frankl, 1959, p. 97). Conversely, without a strong guiding purpose people become more vulnerable to tension, strain, and conflicts. Along these lines, people who have been unable to discover or have been blocked from pursuing an authentic vision for their lives report greater spiritual struggles (Wilt, Grubbs, Exline, & Pargament, in press). Struggles are also more likely when people substitute what Paul Tillich called "preliminary concerns" over "ultimate concerns." To this point, in the United States, surveys over the last 50 years suggest that the language of selfism with its focus on materialism, pleasure, and

celebrity has largely supplanted an emphasis on the traditional virtues of humility, vocation, and love (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012). Preliminary sources of purposes leave people unable to find a deeper meaning in life and, as a result, more prone to spiritual struggles. Grubbs, Exline, Pargament, Volk, and Lindberg (2017) conducted a study relevant here. They followed a sample of college students over one year and found that students who reported a perceived addiction to internet pornography were more likely to develop spiritual struggles.

The orienting system as a source of spiritual struggle. Although orienting systems are generally quite helpful to people in guiding and stabilizing them over the lifespan, limitations in the orienting system can set the stage for spiritual struggles. Let's consider a few examples. Difficulties regulating one's emotions increase the likelihood of spiritual struggles. In this vein, McConnell, Pargament, Ellison, & Flannelly (2006) conducted a national survey of Americans and found that many of the major forms of emotional disorder—depression, anxiety, somatization, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, obsessive-compulsiveness—were associated with more frequent spiritual struggles. Maladaptive beliefs such as low self-esteem have also been tied to more spiritual struggles (Grubbs, Wilt, Stauner, Exline, & Pargament, 2016). In addition, feelings of isolation and alienation from others increase the individual's vulnerability to spiritual struggles (e.g., Ramirez et al., 2012). The same point extends to the spiritual realm, where several studies have shown that people who feel their relationship with God is less stable and secure are more likely to experience spiritual struggles (e.g., Ano & Pargament, 2012). This finding may help to explain why some religious people, even those who are quite devout, may at times experience spiritual struggles. One of the most notable examples comes from Mother Teresa, who felt intense periods of alienation from God during her years of devoted service to people living in Calcutta's slums. At one time, she wrote, "The place of God in my soul is blank. There is no God in me. When the pain of longing is so great—I just long and long for God—and then it is that I feel— He does not want me—He is not there—The torture and pain I can't explain" (Mother Teresa & Kolodiejchuk, 2007, p. 210). Whether or not the individual is religious may have less to say about spiritual struggles than the nature of the individual's relationship with the divine.

Life events and transitions as a source of spiritual struggles. Many people, if not most, can encounter trauma, stressors, and transitions without having their faith shaken. For instance, in a study of college students who went through Hurricane Hermine, most on average felt no anger toward God (Exline, Stauner, Fincham, & May, 2017; for a more extensive review focused on spiritual responses to natural disasters, see Aten et al., 2019). Similarly, almost three-fourths of adults who had gone through cell transplants for cancer did not report any spiritual struggles (King, Fitchett, Murphy, Pargament, Martin, et al., 2017), and about two-thirds of evangelical Christian cancer patients did not report spiritual struggles around their cancer experience (Hall, Shannonhouse, Aten, McMartin, & Silverman, 2019). Nevertheless, major life stressors do make spiritual struggles more likely. Take, for example, the spiritual struggles of a young adolescent grieving the death of her mother: "You could think 'God, God, God' and that all of this [is] a part of his plan, but then you sort of like—why this painful kind of thing? . . . That's when I started to question my faith" (Zuckerman, 2012, p. 49). Singular events of this kind can trigger a spiritual struggle. The accumulation of life stressors also increases the chances of spiritual struggles, perhaps because as difficult circumstances add up, they become more disruptive

of the individual's orienting system (Stauner, Exline, Pargament, Wilt, & Grubbs, 2019). Further support for this possibility comes from studies showing that spiritual struggles are more apt to follow misfortunes that take people by surprise, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Yildirim, Arslan, & Alkahtani, 2021), or that are unexpected, as in the case of prayers that go unanswered (Exline, Wilt, Harriott, Pargament, & Hall, 2021; Maunu & Stein, 2010).

Relational traumas, such as child abuse, sexual abuse, and clergy abuse, are especially fertile soil for the development of spiritual struggles (e.g., Janů et al., 2020; Rosetti, 1995) because they may threaten, violate, or damage aspects of life we hold sacred, such as the basic trust we hold toward parental figures and religious authorities. Researchers have tested this idea more directly and found that life events that are appraised as sacred losses and desecrations are tied to higher levels of spiritual struggle (e.g., Magyar-Russell, Pargament, Trevino, & Sherman, 2013; Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005).

Finally, it is important to note that spiritual struggles may be more likely at some times of life than others. Adolescence, when individuals are forming their own identities, orientations, and strivings as well as differentiating from their families of origin, is one such particularly ripe time for these tensions and conflicts. In a national sample, individuals in this age of emerging adulthood (i.e., 18 to 25) reported the highest level of spiritual struggles among all age groups (Krause, Pargament, Hill, Wong, & Ironson, 2017). In sum, spiritual struggles are a natural part of life, an outgrowth of a wide array of motivational, cognitive, emotional, behavioral, social, and situational factors.

Back to Table of Contents

V. Do Spiritual Struggles Lead to Problems?

Spiritual struggles are a natural part of life, but perhaps not surprisingly, when people are shaken to their core they often experience distress and disorientation [see Figure 1]. Literally, dozens of studies have linked spiritual struggles to markers of distress, including depressed affect, anxiety symptoms, negative emotions, and lower well-being. These findings have emerged from research with nationally representative samples of the general population of the United States (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, & Ironson, 2015). Similar findings apply to people experiencing a wide range of major life stressors, such as physical illness, mental illness, natural disaster, and combat. One study of individuals with HIV/AIDS, for example, showed that higher levels of spiritual struggle were associated with more depressive symptoms and lower quality of life (Lee, Nezu, & Nezu, 2014). Moreover, the connection between spiritual struggles, distress, and disorientation has been demonstrated among people from diverse socio-demographic groups, religious affiliations (e.g., Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, atheist), and nationalities (e.g., Poland, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Israel). Spiritual struggles predicted more depression, anxiety, and stress in a sample from Saudi Arabia facing the COVID-19 pandemic

(Yildirim et al., 2021). Greater spiritual struggles among Roman Catholic students in Poland were also associated with depression and lower life satisfaction (Zarzycka, 2019).

Several researchers have linked spiritual struggles to the risk of more serious problems as well. Currier, Smith, and Kuhlman (2017) found that higher levels of spiritual struggle among veterans from the Iraq and/or Afghanistan wars were tied to greater reported suicidality as measured by lifetime suicidal ideation, prior attempts, suicide threats, and the likelihood of suicide attempts in the future. It is important to add that suicidality was not predicted by any other variable in this study, including combat-related exposure, moral injury, and number of deployments. These findings are especially noteworthy given the prevalence of suicidality and suicide among veterans. As Currier, Smith, and Kuhlman (2017) pointed out, more soldiers died by suicide than combat in 2012 and 2013.

Spiritual struggles have been associated with other serious problems including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), symptoms of physical pain, hostility and cruelty toward others, and even greater risk of mortality. In a study of approximately 600 medically ill elderly inpatients, 176 died over the two years following the study (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001). Higher levels of spiritual struggles at the baseline period of the study predicted a greater risk of mortality, even after controlling for a variety of other variables tied to the risk of dying. Similar findings were reported more recently by Ironson, Kremer, and Lucette (2016). Why might spiritual struggles increase the risk of dying? Perhaps people who struggle more spiritually take poorer care of their health. Perhaps they feel a greater sense of hopelessness. Or perhaps spiritual struggles contribute to a breakdown in the functioning of the immunological system. There is some research support for each of these possibilities, though additional studies are needed.

Many of the studies of spiritual struggles as they relate to mental health have been cross-sectional in their design, leaving open "chicken-and-the-egg" questions about causation. There are three possible models of causation (Pargament & Lomax, 2013). In a primary model, spiritual struggles result in maladjustment. In a secondary model, psychological problems lead to spiritual struggles. In a complex model, spiritual struggles relate to each other in reciprocal fashion. The answer to the chicken-and-the-egg question is more than theoretically interesting. If, for instance, spiritual struggles are the end result of psychological problems, then struggles might be resolved simply by providing treatment for the psychological concerns. If, however, spiritual struggles have a primary part in the development of mental health problems, then struggles would need more direct attention in treatment.

Empirical studies have begun to examine the question of causation. So far, the primary model of spiritual struggles has received the strongest support. Notably, a recent meta-analysis of 32 longitudinal studies indicated that higher levels of spiritual struggles at a baseline period of measurement were significant predictors of increases over time in psychological problems, including stress depression, anxiety, addiction, PTSD, and suicidal ideation (Bockrath et al., in press). A few studies have also yielded some support for the secondary model. In a study of two samples of adolescents with cystic fibrosis or diabetes, Reynolds et al. (2014) reported that higher levels of depression predicted increases in spiritual struggles over a period of two years for both medical groups. And some support for a

complex model comes from a one-year follow-up study by Harris et al. (2012), who worked with a sample of church members coping with a range of acute and chronic stressors: physical and sexual assault or abuse, war, natural disasters, accidents, a diagnosis of a serious illness, or an unexpected death. They found that spiritual struggles mediated the relationship between posttraumatic stress symptoms at baseline and one year later. In other words, posttraumatic stress symptoms at baseline predicted higher levels of spiritual struggles, and spiritual struggles, in turn, predicted higher levels of posttraumatic symptoms one year later. These findings underscore the need for practitioners to attend to the potentially complex interplay among spiritual struggles and psychological distress.

In sum, spiritual struggles can lead to problems and psychological distress can result in spiritual struggles, the research literature shows. It is important to add, however, that the magnitude of these relationships is not so large as to indicate that struggles invariably lead to problems, nor that psychological distress will always result in spiritual struggles. We will take a closer look shortly at what might determine whether struggles lead to problems.

VI. Do Spiritual Struggles Lead to Growth?

We have seen that the research offers a rather bleak picture of the role of spiritual struggles in our lives. Spiritual struggles are robustly tied to signs of distress and, at times, more serious problems. And yet, there are good reasons to question whether this is the total story.

Several well-known psychological theories also place a great deal of emphasis on the importance of times of struggle for human development. Jean Piaget (1954), for one, discussed how cognitive growth occurs through the tension that is created when old ways of understanding the world are no longer adequate to meet new intellectual challenges. Out of that basic frustration, children develop more sophisticated cognitive schemas for thinking about and responding to the environment. Along similar lines, lifespan psychologist Erik Erikson (1998) maintained that every phase of life presents specific challenges and opportunities to people. In the later stage of life, for example, the developmental task is to find a sense of meaning, fulfillment, and integrity rather than feelings of despair and regret. Other theorists emphasize the value of negative emotions and major life stressors in fostering growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) introduced the concept of "posttraumatic growth" to describe the positive transformational changes that can emerge out of trauma, emphasizing the part that struggle plays in this process. They write, "Growth. . . does not occur as a direct result of trauma. It is the individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining the extent to which posttraumatic growth occurs" (p. 5). James Fowler (1981) speaks most directly to the importance of struggle for growth in the spiritual domain. Paralleling stage theories of development, Fowler posited stages of faith development that are an outgrowth of personal and environmental demands that point to the need for change in spiritual worldviews. As he puts it, "Growth and development in faith also result from life crises, challenges and the kinds of disruptions that theologians

call revelation. Each of these bring disequilibrium and requires changes in our ways of seeing and being in faith" (Fowler, 1981, pp. 100–101). Although there are many challenges around how to conceptualize and assess concepts such as posttraumatic growth (Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019; see also the 2020 *Journal of Personality* issue on this topic), growth-related topics remain popular in psychological literature and have clear relevance to the study of spiritual struggles.

Another basis for questioning whether spiritual struggles are simply a source of distress and problems comes from narratives embedded in the world's great religious traditions. Pain accompanying spiritual struggles is certainly one part of these stories, but these accounts do not end with pain. Rather spiritual struggles are said to lead ultimately to growth and personal and social transformation, as we read in the stories of figures such as Moses, Jesus, and the Buddha. Moses' struggles with God, the Pharaoh, and the Hebrew people were essential parts of the story of the liberation of his people from slavery and journey to freedom. The struggle and death of Jesus on the cross set the stage for his resurrection. And the Buddha's confrontation with the temptations sent to him by Mara propelled him to enlightenment.

Descriptions of powerful change and transformation can also be found in more contemporary writings. Recall that Chittister (2003) had been thrown into a period of spiritual turmoil and struggle when she was denied the opportunity to pursue her dream of attending a prestigious writing program. Ultimately, however, she felt that her time of struggle was a source of positive transformation. She writes, "[Spiritual struggle] gives life depth and vision, insight and understanding. It not only transforms us, it makes us transforming as well . . . It teaches us our place in the universe. It teaches us how little we really need in life to be happy. It teaches us that every day life starts over again" (pp. 82, 85). Similar sentiments have been offered by people reflecting on how they have been changed by their spiritual struggles. A college student described her newfound perspective on struggles: "I had a lot of rash emotions coming into this experience. . . [Now] I look at my struggles as more of a positive. . . I've matured in my view of the struggle—it doesn't have to be resolved right now . . . Now it's not so much of a struggle as an evolution" (Dworsky et al., 2013, p. 328). Another woman with AIDS spoke of the deeper appreciation for life she found through her struggles: "I value life more now. I value moments and memories, and you know, what is good about life. Things, material things don't mean like anything anymore. Never, never before did I ever notice the sky like I notice the sky now. You know and the clouds. I savor a sunset when I see a nice sunset. Life is different now. You see things more clearly" (Siegel & Schrimshaw, 2000, p. 1549).

Although there are some compelling reasons to believe that spiritual struggles might lead to growth and positive transformation, the research literature on this topic has generated mixed results at best. In some studies, spiritual struggles have been reportedly linked to positive change. Desai and Pargament (2015) asked a sample of college students struggling spiritually whether they felt that they had grown and/or declined through their struggles. The largest percentage of students (49%) reported that they had grown as a result of their struggles. Higher levels of spiritual struggle have also been associated with perceptions of more growth in several investigations. To take one example, in a study of breast cancer patients prior to their diagnosis and 24 months after surgery, spiritual struggles before the diagnosis were predictive of more posttraumatic growth two years later (Gall, Charbonneau, &

Florack, 2011). Other empirical studies have yielded a contradictory set of findings, with greater spiritual struggles tied to lower levels of perceived growth, secular or spiritual, among Hindu caregivers in India (Thombre, Sherman, & Simonton, 2010) and military veterans in the United States (Wilt, Pargament, et al., 2019).

There is, of course, another possibility. Perhaps spiritual struggles can lead to growth *and* decline. A few studies have found support for this more nuanced notion. In the Desai and Pargament (2015) study just mentioned, 29 percent of the college students indicated that they had both grown and declined as a result of their spiritual struggles. Similarly, in a few other investigations, such as studies of cancer survivors (Trevino, Archambault, Schuster, Richardson, & Moye, 2012) and medical rehabilitation patients (Magyar-Russell et al., 2013), higher levels of spiritual struggle were associated with indicators of both more distress (e.g., anxiety, depression) and greater posttraumatic growth.

Do spiritual struggles lead to growth? The literature suggests that they may, but growth through struggles is by no means inevitable. Spiritual struggles have been sources of powerful personal transformation in narratives from the world's great religious literature and contemporary accounts. The research on this topic, though, offers a more mixed portrait. Spiritual struggles are associated with growth in some studies, decline in other studies, and both growth and decline in still other studies. When we couple this pattern of results with the clear and robust ties between spiritual struggles with distress, disorientation, and decline, the findings as a whole caution us against sentimentalizing spiritual struggles. The pain that accompanies struggles appears to be very real. Any growth that comes from struggles may also be rooted in this emotional pain.

We are left then with a key question. What determines whether spiritual struggles lead to growth and/or decline? We turn our attention now to this important question.

VII. What Determines Whether Spiritual Struggles Lead to Growth and/or Decline?

No single trait, attitude, or skill holds the key to whether spiritual struggles lead to growth and/or decline (see Pargament & Exline, in press, for an extended discussion). Instead, we believe, the trajectory of spiritual struggles is the result of the interplay between the forces—psychological, social, physical, spiritual, situational, and cultural—that shape the search for significance. More specifically, we have suggested that the effect of spiritual struggles on the individual's health and well-being depends on the degree to which the person is whole or broken. Wholeness has to do with how well we put the bits and pieces of our lives together. At our best, we create a relatively integrated, unified whole out of the disparate elements of our lives. At our worst, we are unable to do so and encounter, instead, dis-integration and brokenness. This is not a new idea. The notion that people are in fundamental respects broken is a central part of many religious traditions. These traditions also offer pathways to move from

brokenness to wholeness (e.g., Smith, 1958). Psychological theorists have also written about brokenness and wholeness, starting with William James (1902), who spoke of the unification of the divided self as a central part of the progression toward human functioning at its best. We have focused on three ingredients of wholeness that affect the trajectory of spiritual struggles: breadth and depth, life affirmation, and cohesiveness (see Figure 1).

Breadth and depth. Wholeness is defined in part by the capacity to see and approach life in its fullness. A broad and deep approach to life calls for access to a variety of tools and resources that equip the individual to handle the full range of life's challenges. Breadth and depth also involve a way of seeing; that is, the ability to see both the darker and lighter sides of life as well as the capacity to look beneath the surface and find a deeper, richer dimension of life. In her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dar*k, Taylor (2014) addressed the value of seeing in the dark: "I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light" (p. 5). A few studies have underscored the importance of having a broad and deep orientation to life for the resolution of spiritual struggles. Dworsky, Pargament, Wong, & Exline (2016) found that individuals who tried to avoid rather than accept their spiritual struggles were more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms. In a study of a national sample, Abu-Raiya, Pargament, and Krause (2016) reported that people who see life through a sacred lens (i.e., life as sacred) were more protected from negative effects of spiritual struggle, such as depression and unhappiness.

Life affirmation. An affirming approach to life rests on a sense of compassion, hope, and support that color the individual's orienting system and goals. Life affirmation does not deny struggle, pain, and suffering. Rather it insists that pain and suffering do not have to have the only or final say about life. Without some degree of life affirmation, it is difficult to experience growth through spiritual struggles. With a life affirming approach, however, powerful life transformations are possible, as we read in the words of Chittister (2003): "[The spirituality of struggle] takes isolation and makes it independence, takes darkness, takes the one step beyond fear to courage, takes powerlessness and reclaims it as surrender, takes vulnerability and draws out of it the freedom that comes with self-acceptances, faces the exhaustion and comes to value endurance for its own sake, touches the scars and knows them to be transformation" (p. 96). Once again, a few empirical studies point to the value of life affirmation for growth amidst spiritual struggles. In a study of Muslims and Christians, Saritoprak, Exline, Hall, & Pargament (2017) found that individuals who reframed their spiritual struggles as an opportunity to grow closer to God, become more devout, and seek out divine forgiveness were more likely to perceive more spiritual growth, other positive outcomes, and less depression. Exline, Hall, Pargament, & Harriott (2016) studied a group of Christian undergraduates and found that students who both sought out support from God in their struggles and perceived a supportive response from the divine (e.g., "God healed me") reported higher levels of spiritual and secular growth through their spiritual struggles. Wilt, Stauner, Harriott, Exline, and Pargament (2017) also found that a sense of partnering with God predicted more spiritual transformation in response to spiritual struggles, and another project (Wilt, Pargament, & Exline, 2019) highlighted the idea that spiritual struggles could open the door for sacred moments in some cases.

Cohesiveness. This third ingredient of wholeness involves the degree to which the life journey is organized into a coherent, meaningful pattern that propels people toward a fulfilling purpose and sense of satisfaction and worth along the way. In the words of novelist Carlos Castaneda (1971), the cohesive life has "heart." It is marked by an authentic guiding vision that directs the search for significance, both where to go and how to get there. It is characterized by flexibility and openness to change to meet new demands and challenges that arise over the lifespan. It also rests on the wisdom to weave the various threads of life together into a whole fabric. More concretely, weaving wisdom is built out of the capacity to know "when to do what," to balance competing and at times conflicting motives and needs, and to reconcile the paradoxes and incongruities that are part of life. Speaking to this latter point, Nobel Prize winning physicist Niels Bohr once said, "The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth" (Seldes, 1985, p. 46). Some research has underscored how cohesiveness helps people who struggle spiritually achieve better outcomes. Individuals who take a flexible, questing approach to life, for example, report higher levels of posttraumatic growth and spiritual growth following encounters with spiritual struggles (Hart, Pargament, Grubbs, Exline, & Wilt, 2020). In contrast, people who "get stuck" in their struggles face more adverse outcomes, as illustrated by studies showing more serious declines in physical and mental health among those who report chronic spiritual struggles (e.g., Sherman, Plante, Simonton, Latif, & Anaissie, 2009).

In sum, spiritual struggles often represent a fork in the road. Although it is just emerging, theory and research suggest that the degree of the individual's wholeness may play a key role in determining whether spiritual struggles lead to growth and/or decline.

Back to Table of Contents

VIII. Six Specific Types of Spiritual Struggles

Next, we will present a brief overview of the six types of struggle from the Religious and Spiritual Struggles (RSS) Scale (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014); these are also the struggles highlighted in chapters from our forthcoming book (Pargament & Exline, in press). For each struggle type, we will provide a brief snapshot focusing on key definitions and concepts, predictors, and consequences, along with a few research-based intervention suggestions.

Divine Struggles

Much of the work on spiritual struggles has focused on *divine struggles*—those that involve questions, conflicts, or tensions focused on a person's understanding of God or perceived relationship with God. For example, people might feel angry or disappointed with God (Wood et al., 2010), fear God's disapproval or punishment (Pargament et al., 1998, 2000), or feel isolated from God (Winkelman et al., 2011). Granted, those who believe in God usually report much more positive than negative

emotions toward God; but the two types often coexist, often showing only moderate negative associations (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011). Thus positive emotions toward God do not rule out the possibility of divine struggles, and vice versa.

Prevalence. Typically, people endorse supernatural struggles—that is, those focused on God or the demonic---at lower levels than other struggles; but the numbers are still substantial. In our survey of 18,000 U.S. adults (Exline, Pargament, & Grubbs, 2014), nearly a third (32.6%) reported experiencing some divine struggle over the past few weeks. Also, in nationally representative data from the General Social Survey in 1988, 62 percent of U.S. adults said that they sometimes experienced anger toward God (Exline et al., 2011). These numbers are likely to be underestimates, given that many people see anger toward God as morally unacceptable and may thus be reluctant to admit it (Exline et al., 2012). Even those who do not believe in God will sometimes report anger around the idea of God, based on their own past beliefs about God, cultural teachings, or hypothetical images of what God would be like if God did exist (Bradley et al., 2015, 2017, 2018). Concerns about divine punishment are also common, but they seem to vary considerably across cultures. For example, Winkelman and colleagues (2011) found that among advanced cancer patients in the United States, 22% reported some agreement with the idea that their cancer was part of a divine punishment; but attributions of negative events to divine punishment were much higher in a study of earthquake survivors in El Salvador (57%; Vazquez, Cervellon, Perez-Sales, Vidales, & Gaborit, 2005) and West African patients facing sickle cell disease (74%; Morgan et al., 2015).

Predictors. Divine struggles often arise in cases in which people see God as playing a role in suffering. These struggles have been shown in the wake of major negative events in which people have limited control—things that might be seen as "acts of God" such as death, serious illness or injury, and natural disasters (see Exline, 2020, for a review). But people may also perceive divine unfairness or punishment in the actions of other people, which can range from things like divorce (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011) to atrocities such as the Holocaust, as vividly portrayed in Elie Wiesel's (1979) play *The Trial of God*. When ascribing responsibility to God for harms that people have caused, people often question why God failed to prevent or stop the suffering, even if God did not cause the suffering directly. Some people even blame God, at least indirectly, for their own transgressions: If people see God as creating people with predispositions toward certain types of sins, they might blame God for making them especially vulnerable to moral missteps (Grubbs & Exline, 2014).

Regardless of the exact situation, people are more likely to be angry at God if they see God causing suffering through negative intentions—if they believe that God's actions reflect cruelty or a lack of caring, for example (Exline et al., 2011). Personal beliefs about *theodicies*—the ways that people try to reconcile the presence of suffering and evil with the concept of an all-loving, all-powerful deity—are also important here, as captured by the Views of Suffering Scale (VOSS; Hale-Smith, Park, & Edmondson, 2012; see also Hall et al., 2019). People who see God as cruel or distant are more likely to make negative attributions about God's intentions and to become angry at God (Wilt, Exline, Park, & Pargament, 2016).

At a personal level, what might promote these negative views of God? An important background variable here involves people's relationships with their parents: People who see their parents as cruel may transfer these images onto God (Exline, Homolka, & Grubbs, 2013), and attachment problems with one's parents might play out in a person's perceived relationship with God as well (see Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013, for a review). At a personality level, an especially robust predictor of anger toward God is a sense of entitlement: People who see themselves as especially deserving of special treatment and who believe that God "owes them" report substantially more anger toward God (Grubbs et al., 2013; Grubbs, Exline, Campbell, Twenge, & Pargament, 2018).

Consequences. Divine struggles have been consistently linked to indicators of emotional distress, including anxiety and depression (e.g., Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, & Ironson, 2015; Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2014). Seeing God's intentions as punitive was also linked with greater spiritual distress in a study of veterans (Harris, Usset, & Cheng, 2018) and more PTSD symptoms among survivors of Hurricane Katrina (Rosellini, Coffey, Tracy, & Galea, 2014). Moving beyond distress alone, divine struggles have also been linked with suicidality in several groups, such as U.S. veterans (Raines et al., 2017) and men in recovery from substance use disorders (Currier et al., 2020). Research has also shown some substantial health-related risks of divine struggles. For instance, among HIV patients, divine struggles were linked with faster disease progression over a four-year period (Ironson et al., 2011). A longitudinal study of patients with heart failure (Park, Wortmann, & Edmondson, 2011) showed that divine struggles predicted greater risk of future hospitalizations. And in a study of medically ill older adults (Pargament, Koenig et al., 2001), patients who endorsed divine struggle items of "wondering whether God has abandoned me" and "questioned God's love for me" were more likely to die in the next two years.

Although few studies have examined potential upsides of divine struggles or negative God images, some studies do suggest that seeing God as punitive may play some adaptive role by constraining misbehavior, such as cheating on laboratory-based tasks (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011). Data from large, cross-national surveys show that higher belief in hell (a proxy for divine punishment) has also been linked with lower crime rates (Shariff & Rhemtulla, 2012).

At a spiritual level, divine struggles have been linked with protest behaviors toward God, such as complaining and arguing (Exline, Wilt, Stauner, & Pargament, 2020). Yet there may be some potential benefits to this tendency to protest, as shown in a longitudinal study of patients being treated for chronic headaches (Exline, Krause, & Broer, 2016): When controlling for anger toward God (which predicted sustained distress), voicing more protests to God was linked with reduced distress and an increased sense of meaning over the course of treatment. These findings echo some earlier, cross-sectional findings (Exline et al., 2012), suggesting that people who reported the closest, most resilient relationships with God were those who saw protest toward God as acceptable—just so that protest did not imply rebellion or exiting the relationship with God.

Intervention. Even if people have been taught to see God as all-powerful and all-loving and would agree with these items on a questionnaire, they may have mixed feelings or images involving God based on

their personal experience; in other words, their "head knowledge" of God might not line up with what their heart says (Davis, Granqvist, & Sharp, 2018; Sharp et al., 2019). Also, because many people see anger toward God as morally wrong (Exline et al., 2012), normalizing these feelings and providing a supportive space to disclose them may be very helpful to people. In a study in which college students had disclosed to someone that they were angry at God (Exline & Grubbs, 2011), those who received supportive responses (e.g., "I've felt that way myself") were more likely to approach God and to see their bond with God as being strengthened by the experience. In contrast, those who received judging or shaming responses reported more sustained anger, attempts to suppress anger, substance use, and disengagement from God. Giving people a safe space to express their laments, while acknowledging the wide range of explanations that people can have about God's role in suffering (Hale-Smith et al., 2012), will likely be more helpful than trying to offer quick, one-size-fits-all, theologically based solutions to divine struggles. Studies show that some clinical interventions may help to reduce divine struggle or to improve people's images of God (e.g., Harris, Usset, Voecks, et al., 2018; Olson, 2009), although this work is still in early stages and findings are mixed.

Demonic Struggles

Some struggles center on beliefs about evil: People may believe that they are being oppressed or attacked by the devil or evil spirits, for example. The demonic struggles on the Religious and Spiritual Struggles (RSS) Scale (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014) focus on these types of beliefs. Alternatively, people might attribute negative events or temptations to a dark, impersonal force or perhaps to an evil inclination within themselves.

Of all the types of spiritual struggles, demonic struggles have received the least research attention. Not surprisingly, the topic of supernatural evil seems to be one that many people find frightening or distasteful: In an undergraduate sample, participants typically reported that they did not want to believe in the devil, although they did want to believe in God (Wilt et al., 2020).

Prevalence. The dearth of research around demonic topics certainly does not imply a lack of belief in supernatural evil. In the 2005 U.S. Baylor Religion Survey (as reviewed by Baker, 2008), 75 percent of participants believed that Satan absolutely (58%) or probably (17%) existed. A multisite study of undergraduates (Exline et al., in press) showed that participants saw the devil as having less power and influence than God, but still a substantial amount—and more than human spirits. Furthermore, beliefs that spirits—including evil ones—can possess people are very common: In a pioneering study of 488 societies by anthropologist Erika Bourguignon (1976), about 75 percent of those societies showed beliefs in possession. These widespread beliefs in the existence and power of evil are reflected in reports of demonic struggle: Our large study of U.S. adults (Exline, Pargament, & Grubbs, 2014) revealed that 32% reported some demonic struggles in the past few weeks.

Predictors. As shown in recent work on *supernatural operating rules* (Exline et al., in press), people will also be more likely to report experiences with the devil (and other supernatural entities, such as God, ghosts, and fate) if they not only believe in the devil but see the devil as being highly active in the world: having

sufficient power and intention to affect events and doing so often, in the lives of many people, and in many different ways. As stated above, many people do not want to believe in the devil; and wanting to believe does correlate positively with actual belief (Wilt, Stauner, & Exline, 2020). Socialization to believe in the devil is also linked closely with current beliefs (Wilt et al., 2020). Beliefs are more likely among conservatives (Jensen, 2009) and—at least in our predominantly Western, Christian samples— among those who are more religious (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014). Some forms of mental illness, such as psychotic or dissociative disorders, may also lead to unusual, frightening beliefs, perceptions, or behaviors that some might frame in terms of demonic influence (see Exline, Pargament, Wilt, & Harriott, 2021, for a review).

The consistent positive link between demonic struggles and religiousness raises some important cautions when interpreting correlations with the Demonic subscale of the RSS (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014): Because demonic struggles show consistent positive correlations with religiousness, it is important to control for religiousness when looking at correlations with demonic struggles. Otherwise, demonic struggles might show misleading connections with other variables because of their links with religiousness. For example, it might be easy to conclude, based on raw correlations, that demonic struggles are associated with a closer relationship with God or with reduced substance use—but these associations would likely be explained by the overlap between demonic struggles and religiousness.

When do people attribute events to the devil? One qualitative study of undergraduates showed that situations involving negative events, temptation, and immoral thoughts were common themes in narratives about Satan (Ray, Lockman, Jones, & Kelly, 2015). Experimental work has shown that among those who are highly religious, meaning-related threats may also lead people toward more belief in supernatural evil (Routledge, Abeyta, & Roylance, 2016). People may also see the devil working through the actions of other people (Ray et al., 2015); this demonization process can be very dangerous in social terms, as we describe below.

Consequences. Demonic struggles, like other r/s struggles, show consistent associations with emotional distress (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, & Ironson, 2015; Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014). Like divine struggles, demonic struggles were also shown to predict higher mortality rates over two years in a medically ill sample of older adults (Pargament et al., 2001). Aside from these mental health concerns, some of the most troubling correlates of demonic beliefs and attributions center on demonization, in which people see the devil acting through other people. In a sample of divorced women, Krumrei and colleagues (2011) found that demonization of one's ex-spouse was linked with higher levels of aggression. Such demonization can happen at the group level as well: A study of Christian students showed that students who saw Jews as demonically influenced by having killed Jesus reported more anti-Semitic attitudes (Pargament, Trevino, Mahoney, & Silberman, 2007). In the present day, a discourse analysis by O'Donnell (2020) suggests that spiritual warfare framing by Christian nationalists could fuel hostility toward outgroups of many kinds, including immigrants, liberals, and people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). Almost no work exists

yet on potentially adaptive implications of demonic struggles, although one study did suggest that demonic attributions may help some people avoid blaming God for problems (Beck & Taylor, 2008).

Intervention. There is controversy around the idea of intervention for demonic struggles, in part because of the multiple conceptual "lenses" that clinicians may use to frame them (see Exline, Pargament, Wilt, & Harriott, 2021, for a review). Some clinicians might frame reports of demonic struggles in terms of serious mental illness, whereas others might see them as the result of normal psychological processes (e.g., cultural or religious socialization; anger at outgroup members). People who see demonic struggles as actual supernatural events may turn to controversial tools such as spiritual warfare exercises and attempts to rid people of evil spirit influence through exorcism and deliverance. Although we do not have space to go into detail here, we have proposed that the way in which demonic struggles are framed could have major implications for treatment (Exline, Pargament, Wilt, & Harriott, 2021; Pargament & Exline, in press). Analyzing the psychological sources of demonic attributions, helping clients explore their beliefs about evil, refocusing believers on God's love and power, and reframing demonic struggles as moral struggles may all be fruitful strategies to consider.

Doubt Struggles

Many people struggle with doubts about religion and spirituality. Note that doubt is not the same thing as unbelief; instead, doubt centers on uncertainty, confusion, and wondering if something is true (cf. Pruyser, 1974). Religious and spiritual doubts could be focused on broad existential questions (e.g., Does God exist? Can I believe the Bible? Is there really a heaven?), or they might focus on narrower issues, such as religious community positions on social issues or the truth of a specific event reported in a sacred text. It is important to add that some people experience doubts without being troubled by them; for example, some people hold a *quest orientation* to religion (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993) in which they see doubts as a normal part of spiritual life and embrace them. Our interest here is in cases in which people are experiencing tension or inner conflict about their doubts.

Prevalence. Doubt-related struggles are widespread. In our large sample of 18,000 U.S. adults (Exline, Pargament & Grubbs, 2014), nearly half (45.4%) reported some doubt-related struggles in the last few weeks. And in an earlier study of Christian high school adolescents, 77 percent reported some doubts about religion (Kooistra, 1990).

Predictors. Some doubts arise in the wake of traumatic experiences that shake people's views of the world. To give one dramatic example, consider the results of one study focusing on mothers who had given birth to a child with a serious intellectual disability (Childs, 1985): 90 percent reported some doubts about the existence of God. In a study of suicide survivors (Dransart, 2018), the majority reported that the event raised major questions about their faith. Yet trauma is not required to prompt doubts about religion. Sometimes people can experience doubts simply because of encounters with new ideas and people who believe differently, as Zuckerman (2012) reported in a project focused on apostasy. Simply attending an ecumenical college was linked with doubt-related struggles in another study (Small & Bowman, 2011).

In an interview-based study with Roman Catholic and Dutch Reformed high school students, Kooistra (1990) identified several primary sources of doubt: the problem of evil, personal disappointments and losses, religious hypocrisy, the idea that people created the idea of God to meet their own needs, evidence that challenges religious teachings, problems of religious relativism (i.e., diverse religions all claiming to be true); and failures of ritual, such as prayers that seemed to go unanswered. Choudhoud (2018) surveyed a sample of American Muslims and found similar sources of doubt.

More-religiously committed people do seem to have some protection against doubt (see Flannelly, 2017, for a review). Yet studies suggest that when doubts do arise, people may be more troubled by them if they are more engaged with religion (Kézdy, Martos, Boland, & Horváth-Szabó, 2011; Krause & Wulff, 2004).

Consequences. Doubt-related struggles have shown consistent links with emotional distress in many studies (e.g., Ellison & Lee, 2010; Krause & Wulff, 2004). One study using a large, representative U.S. sample (Galek, Krause, Ellison, Kudler, & Flannelly, 2007) showed connections between doubts and a variety of psychiatric symptoms, including paranoid ideation, hostility, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, phobic anxiety, and somatization. A longitudinal study by Krause (2006) provided support for a primary struggles model: over a three-year period, greater doubt among Christians predicted decreases in self-esteem, optimism, and mood. In terms of religious consequences, a longitudinal study of undergraduates (Van Tongeren et al., 2019) showed that doubt-related struggles predicted negative shifts in views of God (more punishing; less good) over one year. Hunsberger, Pratt, and Pancer (2002) found that among high school students, greater doubts about religion predicted less religious engagement two years later.

Yet there may be some bright sides to doubt as well. Krause and Ellison (2009) found, in a survey of older adults who reported some religious doubts, that most agreed that their doubts had helped them to understand their faith better. Several other studies have shown that when other spiritual struggles are controlled, the relationship between doubt and distress shifts from positive to negative (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014; Wong & Pargament, 2019); at some level, then, doubt may reflect a healthy openness to questioning and exploration—which would be consistent with the positive framing of doubts in the quest orientation to religion (Batson et al., 1993; Hart et al., 2020).

Intervention. Given the way that doubt can reflect both anxious questioning and a healthy openness to new ideas, an important practical implication would be to give people a safe space to explore their doubts and to see them as potential sources for growth—an opportunity to remain open, curious, and flexible. The Winding Road intervention (Dworsky et al., 2013) could be a useful tool in this regard.

Ultimate Meaning Struggles

Struggles of ultimate meaning involve tensions, strains, and conflicts around one's ultimate purpose in life (Pargament & Exline, in press). These might center on challenges of finding a higher purpose for

one's life, letting go of some deeper purpose that no longer seems to fit, or finding or creating a new sense of meaning or purpose after an earlier one has been uprooted. Studies of U.S. adults and undergraduates by Wilt, Stauner, Lindberg, and colleagues (2017) have clarified that ultimate meaning struggles do not just reflect an absence of perceived meaning or a search for meaning, although they are related to both of these.

Prevalence. Struggles around ultimate meaning are very common. In our large study of U.S. adults (Exline, Pargament, & Grubbs, 2014), 52 percent reported some ultimate meaning struggles over the past few weeks. Because religion is often viewed as a powerful source of meaning (Park, 2013), it is not surprising that ultimate meaning struggles correlate negatively with religiousness (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014; Stauner et al., 2016) and are often reported by nonreligious individuals (Sedlar et al., 2018).

Predictors. Although there is a large literature on perceived meaning in life, largely building on the work of Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler (2006), few studies have focused on the prediction of ultimate meaning struggles specifically. In the study by Wilt, Stauner, Lindberg, and colleagues (2017) mentioned above, a perceived absence of meaning and a high search for meaning interacted to predict struggles with ultimate meaning. In other words, people were especially likely to report struggles with ultimate meaning if they were searching for deep purpose in their lives but had not found this sense of purpose (or had perhaps lost it). Traumatic life events or oppressive circumstances might also contribute to struggles around ultimate meaning, as portrayed vividly by Viktor Frankl (1959) in his classic book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, where he recounts the horrors of being imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp and reflects on the many ways that people struggle to find meaning under circumstances of unfathomable suffering and tragedy.

Consequences. Out of all forms of spiritual struggle, ultimate meaning struggles are usually the ones that show the strongest, clearest connections with emotional distress, as shown in cross-sectional analyses among undergraduates (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014; Wilt, Grubbs, Pargament, & Exline, 2017) as well as an atheist subsample (Sedlar et al., 2018). Compared with other struggles, ultimate meaning struggles also seem to be especially clear predictors of poorer mental health over time: In samples of veterans, ultimate meaning struggles predicted increases over time in suicidal behavior (Currier, McDermott, McCormick, et al., 2018) and greater symptoms of bipolar disorder along with declines in positive mental health (Currier, Foster, Witvliet, et al., 2019).

To our knowledge, empirical studies have not yet shown connections between meaning-related struggles and growth; this is an area for future work. One exception is a qualitative study (Chow & Nelson-Becker, 2010) with 11 female stroke survivors from Hong Kong. These participants reported many spiritual struggles, including those focused on ultimate meaning. Yet some did report that they were able to use Chinese spiritual practices emphasizing harmony and balance to help them attain a type of transformation of significance: a shift from material, body-focused concerns to greater focus on caring for their loved ones.

Intervention. Several meaning-related interventions have shown evidence for effectiveness in empirical studies, including Paul Wong's (2015) Meaning Therapy, Spiritual Legacy work among people at the end of life (Piderman et al., 2015), and the practice of prioritizing meaningful activities in daily life (Russo-Netzer et al., 2019). Even unbidden spiritual experiences—sometimes termed *sacred moments*—may help people to resolve spiritual struggles, including ultimate meaning struggles, over time (Magyar-Russell, Pargament, Grubbs, Wilt, & Exline, 2020).

Moral Struggles

Moral struggles, though wide-ranging in content, focus in some way on conflicts or strains around moral decision-making and behavior—often with a focus on the incongruity between one's values and actions. From the perspective of an outside observer, moral struggles might seem perfectly warranted in some cases (e.g., committing a serious relational offense or crime) but could seem like overreactions in other cases (e.g., self-condemnation after a minor mistake). Given that humans are driven by such a complex mix of higher values, survival-related appetites and drives, impulses, and imperfections, it is not surprising that we often struggle around moral issues.

Prevalence. Our large study of U.S. adults (Exline, Grubbs, & Pargament, 2014) showed that moral struggles are very widespread: over half (57.5%) of participants reported some moral struggles in the past few weeks. In one study (Breuninger et al., 2019), moral struggles were also the most frequent type of struggle reported among veterans. Here there is clear overlap with the concept of *moral injury*---negative consequences suffered by people when they have participated in or passively witnessed acts that violate their moral code—which has been studied most in veteran samples (e.g., Currier, Foster, & Isaak, 2019; Evans et al., 2018).

Predictors. Broadly speaking, moral struggles arise when people are uncertain of the correct moral choice of action or when their (actual or anticipated) behavior violates some important moral value. Perfectionistic moral standards, as shown in patterns of scrupulosity linked with obsessive-compulsive disorder, could add fuel to the fire. Moral struggles, like demonic struggles, also show consistent positive links with religiousness (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014; Wilt, Evans, et al., 2019). This makes sense given that religions often attempt to impose some moral order on behavior. An overview of many studies (McCullough & Carter, 2013) showed a clear positive link between religious engagement and self-control across a wide variety of behaviors, suggesting that actual or anticipated moral violations might be especially stressful for devout religious individuals. To the extent that religious people sanctify their moral strivings, seeing them as having sacred weight, moral failures could seem like not just mistakes but sins or even desecrations (Pargament, Magyar, et al., 2005). Low self-esteem and internalizing blame for struggles also predict higher levels of moral struggle, as shown in a sample of military veterans (Wilt, Evans, et al., 2019).

Consequences. Moral struggles show clear and consistent associations with symptoms of depression and anxiety, as shown in a national U.S. sample (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, & Ironson, 2015). Moral struggles can also help to explain the link between morally injurious events and clinical symptoms of

posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety, as shown in a sample of veterans (Evans et al., 2018). Moral struggles have also been linked with higher levels of problematic gambling behavior (Gutierrez, Chapman, Grubbs, & Grant, 2020), greater alcohol use (Stauner, Exline, Kusina, & Pargament, 2019), and even suicidality (Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000). Concern about breaking religious rules can lead some people to disengage from religion as well (Zuckerman, 2012).

Yet moral struggles, though often highly distressing, can also be healthy, as they often reflect a desire to follow one's conscience and do good. People seem to have an intuitive grasp of this idea that moral struggles can be appropriate: As Starmans and Bloom (2016) showed in an experiment, people who do the right thing are evaluated more favorably in moral terms if they had previously experienced a moral conflict (vs. no such conflict). In Islam, the concept of *spiritual jihad* reflects this idea of a conflict between higher and lower parts of the self, and the associated struggle to follow God and promote one's higher nature has been linked with positive religious coping and spiritual growth (Saritoprak, Exline, & Stauner, 2018). The self-forgiveness literature also points out possible benefits of moral struggle: Just so people can avoid the negative extremes of shame and self-condemnation, remorse about transgressions can be helpful in terms of promoting repentance and relational repair efforts (Fisher & Exline, 2010). The power of being able to work through guilt was illustrated in a recent study of HIV patients (Ironson, Kremer, & Lucette, 2016): Those who reported being more able to overcome spiritually focused guilt also described decreases in drug use and promiscuous sex, shifts to a more benevolent view of God, and more religious involvement.

Intervention. Broadly speaking, techniques for helping people cope with moral struggles involve helping people to maintain a strong moral compass that helps them to make good moral choices and to accept responsibility for misdeeds—but without lapsing into shame or scrupulosity. Techniques related to self-forgiveness (see Woodyatt, Worthington, Wenzel, & Griffin, 2017, for a review), divine forgiveness (Exline, 2020; Fincham, 2020), coping with moral injury (Harris, Park, Currier, Usset, & Voecks, 2015), and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2016) have special relevance here. The From Vice to Virtue intervention (Ano, Pargament, Wong, & Pomerleau, 2017), which also focuses directly on moral struggles, is also a promising approach to treatment.

Interpersonal Struggles around Religion

Religion involves an attempt to bring people together around common beliefs and values. Given this fundamentally interpersonal nature of religion, disagreements and hurts are perhaps inevitable. For members of religious communities, interpersonal struggles around religion might involve disagreement with religious teaching, conflicts with other community members, or extremely serious problems such as those involving sexual abuse by clergy. Yet people do not need to be members of religious communities to have interpersonal struggles around religion: Many atheists and people who have disengaged from religion also report these struggles (Exline, Van Tongeren, et al., 2020; Sedlar et al., 2018); and it is little wonder, given that atheists in the United States are disliked and distrusted—often at levels similar to rapists (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011). Perhaps equally shocking are FBI data from 2018 which revealed that over 20 percent of single-bias hate crimes (more than three daily)

were religiously motivated (https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018/topic-pages/incidents-and-offenses). Regardless of whether people are religious themselves, then, many feel a sense of anger at organized religion, as captured in an item from the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014).

Prevalence. Interpersonal struggles around religion are very common. On our screener given to 18,000 U.S. adults, 45.5 percent endorsed some interpersonal struggles around religion in the past few weeks. In a study focusing on members of religious communities, 89 percent reported at least one interpersonal struggle around religion (Dollahite, Marks, & Young, 2019). Interpersonal struggles around religion often top the list of spiritual struggles, as shown in studies of military veterans in college (Currier, McDermott, McCormick, et al., 2018), individuals identifying as transgender or gender nonconforming (TGNC; Exline, Przeworski, et al., 2021), and Democratic voters in the context of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election (Exline, Stauner, Wilt, & Grubbs, 2021).

Predictors. Sometimes religion can be a source of serious interpersonal trauma. In a national survey of survivors of clergy sexual abuse, 71 percent wondered if the church had abandoned them (Murray-Swank, 2010). Being a member of a religious minority group can also be a major source of strain: In a study of Jewish, Muslim, and minority Christian families by Marks, Dollahite, and Young (2019), 61 percent reported religiously oriented conflicts with people outside their families. Hostility or disapproval from religious groups can also be internalized, as shown in a study of religious/spiritual sexual minority individuals (Brewster, Velez, Foster, Esposito, & Robinson, 2016). On the other hand, seeing one's own group as spiritually superior has also been linked to enmity with religious group members, as shown in a large national phone survey of eight countries in Europe (Kupper & Zick, 2010). Other problems include seeing differences of opinions as threats or desecrations, as described in the study above about some Christians seeing Jews as desecrators of Christianity (Pargament et al., 2007). Experimental work also shows that people behave more aggressively if prompted with scriptures that suggest that God sanctions violence (Bushman et al., 2007).

Consequences. Reflecting some of the serious social consequences of interpersonal religious struggles mentioned above, interpersonal struggles around religion can be a major reason for doubting the value of religion (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997) or deciding to pull back from religious involvement (Exline, Van Tongeren et al., 2020; Zuckerman, 2012). In terms of mental health, interpersonal religious struggles have been linked with depression and anxiety in multiple studies involving broad, general samples (e.g., Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, & Ironson, 2015; Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014) and groups of people who often face religious rejection, such as atheists (Sedlar et al., 2018) and those with same-sex attractions (Lauricella, Phillips, & Dubow, 2017). In a longitudinal study, interpersonal struggles with clergy and congregation members were found to predict increases in depression among elderly, medically ill patients over two years (Pargament et al., 2004). Religious differences have also been linked with greater odds of divorce (Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009). Communication problems in marriage can also be inflamed by spiritual one-upmanship, in which partners use religious beliefs or opinions to win an argument (Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2021). Although interpersonal religious struggles and associated attempts at personal or religious

community change could conceivably lead to growth, we are not aware of any research to date focusing specifically on this possibility.

Intervention. Of course, many of the thorny interpersonal issues that often surround religion have no easy answers. Still, studies do suggest that interpersonal struggles around religion could be addressed by seeking points of common belief with those in other traditions (Kunst, Kimel, Shani, Alayan, & Thomsen, 2019; Streib & Klein, 2014), trying to see the sacredness within other people (Padgett, Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2019), and working to forgive religious individuals who have caused interpersonal harm (Zarzycka, 2019).

IX. Conclusions and Future Directions

Spiritual struggles have been easy to overlook, perhaps because they lie in the cracks and crevices of human experience. Struggles with sacred matters are "in between" phenomena, falling in between connection and disconnection, control and impulsivity, security and insecurity, belief and unbelief, meaningfulness and meaninglessness, and good and evil. But make no mistake about it, wherever people encounter life's most fundamental tensions and challenges we can find spiritual struggles. In recent years, researchers have begun to shed light more directly on spiritual struggles and, as we have shown in this report, we are learning a great deal.

One of the most important insights we are gaining about spiritual struggles is that they are not unusual or limited to people who are immature or seriously ill. They are instead a natural feature of life, outgrowths of our search for significance, our orientation to living, and the situations we encounter over the lifespan. When we become more attuned to spiritual struggles, we see that they are part and parcel of the origin stories of virtually every major religious tradition. In fact, stories of spiritual struggle and their resolution could be said to lie at the center of religion. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss spiritual struggles as things of the past. Surveys reveal that people from every demographic group in the general population, every religious affiliation, diverse cultures, and the most devout to the most secular report spiritual struggles. Spiritual struggles are also commonplace among people facing the major crises of our times, including migration, poverty, the COVID-19 pandemic, physical and sexual abuse, natural disaster, and family dissolution. Even among one of the fastest growing groups in the United States, the "religious nones"—agnostics, atheists, the religiously unaffiliated, and the "spiritual but not religious"—spiritual struggles are not unusual. Mercadante (2020) interviewed many "religious nones" and came to this conclusion: "Struggles with the existential issues that all humans face will continue. Nones may experience them differently, define them as primarily psychological or biological, or dismiss them as a residue of the past. But many may instead recognize them for the spiritual struggles they genuinely are and seek appropriate resources that will lead toward resolution and growth" (p. 13).

We are also learning that spiritual struggles have important implications for the way our lives unfold. The picture is clear. Among diverse people facing diverse life events in diverse contexts, research shows that spiritual struggles of all kinds can shake us to our core, leaving us distressed and disoriented. In some instances, spiritual struggles have also been linked to serious decline, including PTSD, suicidality, social problems, physical illness, and even greater risk of mortality. And studies show that spiritual struggles can be expressed within the full range of psychopathology, from anxiety, depression, marital/family problems, and impulse control disorders to addictions, personality disorders, bipolar illness, and schizophrenia. It is important to add that a growing number of longitudinal studies offer support for a primary model of spiritual struggles in which struggles can lead to greater distress, disorientation, and decline over time. Taken as a whole, these findings are sobering. Spiritual struggles can be a painful—even shattering—experience. Thus, we can ill afford to overlook or dismiss tensions, conflicts, and strains in the spiritual domain of life.

As grim as these findings appear to be, we should not neglect the possibility of a brighter side to spiritual struggles. As developmental theorists have stressed, periods of struggle can be critical launching pads for cognitive, moral, and personality growth. Without struggle, they note, people would remain frozen in place, unable to respond to changing internal demands within themselves and external demands from the outside world. Spiritual struggles too may be an essential part of the human search for significance and purpose in life. In support of this notion, stories of personal growth and transformation through spiritual struggles can be found in both the classic religious literature and in more contemporary accounts. However, the empirical research that has been conducted on whether spiritual struggles are linked with growth has yielded mixed findings. Thus, it appears that, while growth through spiritual struggles may take place, it is not inevitable. People should be cautious, then, about sentimentalizing spiritual struggles. The pain of struggles may not always lead to gain.

Further research is needed to clarify the connections between spiritual struggles and growth. Here are a few important directions for future study:

- Longitudinal studies that follow up on people over a longer period to test whether it takes more time for people to experience growth when they encounter spiritual struggles.
- Research that makes use of more nuanced indicators of growth, such as measures of the ability to experience melancholy (i.e., both sadness and happiness), compassion for the suffering of others, a sense of humor, and virtues including the courage to raise hard questions and the humility to admit that we do not have all the answers.
- Studies that consider new ways of assessing growth, ones that do not rely exclusively on retrospective self-reports.
- Studies of whether the relationship between spiritual struggles and growth vary across the specific types of spiritual struggle: divine, demonic, doubt-related, moral, interpersonal, and struggles of ultimate meaning.
- Research that simultaneously examines measures of both decline and growth to test whether spiritual struggles could lead to both pain *and* gain. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1975) spoke to this

possibility: "The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen" (p. 96).

We believe that it is helpful to think of spiritual struggles as forks in the road, pivotal times of life that can result in growth, decline, or both. In this report, we have emphasized that the trajectory of spiritual struggles at these pivotal times depends on the individual's degree of wholeness. By wholeness we are referring to the degree to which the individual has a broad and deep perspective, a life-affirming orientation, and the capacity to put the pieces of life together into a cohesive pattern. Research studies are beginning to show that these ingredients of wholeness may shape the trajectory of spiritual struggles in positive ways. Additional studies, however, will be needed to identify the precursors to growth and decline following spiritual struggles.

Research in this area will be of value not only scientifically, but practically as well, to health care professionals who face key questions in their work with spiritual strugglers, such as: What are the best ways to offer help to people in the midst of spiritual struggles? How can we help individuals come to terms with their spiritual struggles before they result in serious problems? How can we use times of spiritual struggle to foster positive life transformation and greater wholeness and growth?

Overall, the literature on spiritual struggles creates a strong rationale for bringing spiritual struggles into the therapeutic arena. However, much work must be done to make that integration more of a reality. Most therapists have not received any training about religion and spirituality in their graduate education (e.g., Schafer, Handal, Brawer, & Ubinger, 2011), and work with spiritual struggles requires special sensitivity. On the bright side, however, programs to develop spiritual competencies among therapists, including competencies in the area of spiritual struggles, have shown promise (e.g., Pearce, Pargament, Oxhandler, Vieten, & Wong, 2020). Further study is also needed to evaluate the utility of standardized measures of spiritual struggles (e.g., Exline, Pargament et al., 2014) as well as interview approaches (Pargament, 2007) in the clinical assessment process. Not only that, we need to learn more about the best ways to assist people grappling with specific forms of struggle: divine, doubt-related, moral, interpersonal, demonic, and struggles of ultimate meaning. It is especially important to understand how best to assist people who come from other cultures and traditions, especially nonwestern religions (e.g., Islam, Hinduism, folk religions) who may experience spiritual struggles in ways that depart from western religions. Finally, practitioners and researchers should join forces to develop and evaluate programs to address spiritual struggles; along these lines, we have noted several programs that have shown encouraging results (e.g., Ano et al., 2017; Dworsky et al., 2013; Harris et al., 2018).

Before concluding, we believe it is important to consider a few of the implications of spiritual struggles for contexts that lie outside of the therapy office. One key context is the religious institution. Our experience has been that spiritual struggles are rarely discussed openly from the pulpit or within

religious educational programs. But this topic is too important to overlook. As we noted earlier, spiritual struggles are relevant to every age group. Adolescents, in particular, are likely to encounter spiritual struggles as they make the transition to greater independence from family and form their own orientations to religious and spiritual matters. Without information and guidance regarding spiritual struggles, many may choose to leave religion and spirituality entirely. Rather than criticizing or stigmatizing adolescents when they encounter struggles, clergy and religious leaders should anticipate the spiritual struggles of adolescents and meet them with reassurance, support, encouragement, and open and frank conversation. By revealing their own spiritual struggles and the ways they have come to terms with them, clergy and religious leaders could also serve as valuable models to adolescents, normalizing struggles and illustrating how they can remain a part of rather than disengage from religious and spiritual life in these times of life.

As important as religious institutions are to spiritual development, we believe it is critical not to simply delegate the subject of spiritual struggles to these congregations. Families too represent an important context for conversations about spiritual struggles. Because questions and conflicts about religious and spiritual issues are a natural part of development, parents should also anticipate the spiritual struggles of their children and be ready to encourage rather than discourage these questions, as difficult as they may be, and share their own experiences and approach to difficult issues. Imagine, for example, the rich possibilities that could grow out of occasional conversations around the dinner table about religious and spiritual matters that include spiritual struggles. In short, we believe that a more open and supportive approach to spiritual struggles by both religious institutions and families could better equip young adults to understand and resolve the spiritual struggles they are likely to encounter at some point of their lives.

Few of us go through life without encountering periods when we are deeply shaken, when our most fundamental beliefs, practices, relationships, and values no longer provide the steady and secure orientation that guides us toward the significance we seek from life. Being shaken to the core can be quite disturbing, even more so when individuals are unable to make sense of their experience or find the support and guidance to work their way through this difficult time. But we are learning that spiritual struggles do not have to be shattering experiences. If they can lead to distress, disorientation, and decline they can also lead to greater wholeness and growth. As our knowledge of spiritual struggles continues to expand, we will be better able to understand and address this often overlooked but pivotal and very human experience.

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