

## PURPOSEFUL ACTION AND THE STRIVING FOR THE SACRED

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*Religion invests human existence with meaning by establishing goals and value systems that potentially pertain to all aspects of a persons' life. A goals approach rooted in personal strivings provides a general unifying framework to capture the dynamic aspect of religion in people's lives. Empirical research on the measurement of spirituality and religion through personal strivings is described. The origins of spiritual strivings in motivational needs theory and in an evolutionary psychology rooted in solutions to adaptive problems faced by our ancestors are discussed.*

Purpose has a long history in the academic study of the psychology of religion. Gordon Allport is considered by most in the field to be the founding father of personality psychology. The field of personality has, as its goal, a scientific account of what a person is like, in his or her entirety. Whatever else it includes, this account, for Allport, must involve both *intention* and *religion*. In his book, *Pattern and Growth in Personality*, Allport wrote »Intention refers to what the person is trying to do...it tells us what sort of future a person is trying to bring about, and this is the most important question we can ask of any mortal« (1961, p. 223). As many are well aware, he also made significant contributions to the psychology of religion. For Allport, religion involves a response of the total self, and that religious attitudes (or *sentiments*, the term that he preferred) differ chiefly from other aspects of personality in their comprehensiveness and centrality to the person.

The same year that Gordon published his seminal text, his older brother Floyd, a distinguished social psychologist, published an article in which he proposed that an individual's personality might be better described in terms of what the person is »trying to do« or the purpose of purposes that a person is trying to carry out (F. Allport, 1937). Allport coined the term »teleonomic trend« to describe these behavioral tendencies, which he claimed were more dynamic and revealing of personality than were dispositional traits. In my doctoral dissertation (Emmons, 1986), I developed the concept of »personal strivings«, modern day descendants of the teleonomic trend. In so doing, I

began with several assumptions concerning human motivation, namely that (1) People seek purpose by setting and striving for goals, (2) These goals include the psychological, social, and spiritual, (3) Goals have cognitive, affective, and behavioral significance, and (4) Goal content (the »what« of goals), goal structure (the »how« of goals), and goal orientation (the »why« of goals) predict important life outcomes, such as well-being and performance. Over the past two decades, psychologists have learned how goals, as key integrative and analytic units in the study of human motivation, contribute to effective life functioning and to overall emotional, physical and relational well-being.

### **Personal Strivings and the Sacred**

To empirically study goals, and to differentiate them from other units of analysis, I used the term »personal strivings.« Personal strivings are consciously accessible and personally meaningful objectives that people pursue in their daily lives (see Emmons, 1999, for a review of goal constructs in psychology). They are the goals that a person characteristically is trying to accomplish. As individualized and cognitively elaborated representations, they are the concretized expression of future orientation and life purpose. Several points need to be made with respect to the term »personal strivings« and their conceptual nature. First, an emphasis on the concept of striving implies an action-oriented perspective on human motivation. It stresses the behavioral movement toward identifiable endpoints as can be seen in the following definition of goals as »an imagined or envisaged state condition toward which a person aspires and which drives voluntary activity« (Karoly, 1993, p. 274). Second, strivings provide information not only on what a person is trying to do, but also on whom a person is trying to be – the relatively high level goals that are central aspects of a person’s identity. Third, goals are highly personal – they reflect subjective experience, values and commitments as uniquely identified by the person. I rely on individual accounts of purpose and do not assume that all people seek the same purposes in the same ways. Fourth, these goals represent potentialities rather than actualities in that they are never fully satisfied. They reflect what a person is trying to do, not necessarily what they are actually doing. To strive also implies that meaning comes from the »journey« and not just arriving at the »destination.« However, one can also strive toward particular modes of being without necessarily making a strenuous effort, for instance in Eastern philosophies which emphasize a cessation of striving and non-attachment to goals (e.g. being at peace with oneself, being at one with the universe). Certainly the notion of strivings (as a noun) would include these latter examples, in that they reflect desired endpoints or objectives to be realized. Spiritual concerns are reflected in both »doing« as well as in »being« goals; indeed perhaps

that is an important distinction between the types of goals that adherents to Western and Eastern religious systems aspire toward.

The use of goal language in discussions of spirituality and religion may seem foreign. After all, isn't religion about beliefs and doctrine, feelings and emotions, perceptions and experiences of the sacred? Yes, but religion is also about goals. Spirituality is a motivational force that energizes and directs the goal striving process. One of the basic functions of a religious belief system and a religious worldview is that it provides »an ultimate vision of what people should be striving for in their lives« (Pargament and Park, 1995, p. 15) and the strategies to reach those ends. In addition to the prescriptive nature of religion, there is also a long history of using goal-language metaphorically to depict spiritual growth. In devotional writings and in sacred scriptures, spiritual growth and spiritual maturity are viewed as a process of goal attainment, with the ultimate goal being intimacy with the divine. In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul writes »Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.« (Philippians 3:12-14, *NIV*).

If spirituality is the search for the sacred (Hill et al., 2000), then spiritual strivings represent unique, individually tailored ways in which the person negotiates his or her search for the sacred. In my book (Emmons, 1999) I described the criteria I originally used for classifying strivings as spiritual. Spiritual strivings are those personal goals that are concerned with ultimate purpose, ethics, commitment to a higher power, and a seeking of the divine in daily experience. By identifying and committing themselves to spiritual goals, people strive to develop and maintain a relationship to the sacred. In other words, spiritual strivings are strivings that reflect a desire to transcend the self, that reflect an integration of the individual with larger and more complex units, or that reflect deepening or maintaining a relationship with a higher power. Strivings are coded as spiritual if they reflect concern for an integration of the person with larger and more complex units: with humanity, nature, with the cosmos (»to achieve union with the totality of existence«, »to immerse myself in nature and be part of it«, »to live my life at all times for God,« »to approach life with mystery and awe«). As implied, spiritual strivings contain both conventional religious themes as well as more personalized expressions of spiritual concern. Although as a psychologist of religion I have been primarily concerned with »religious spirituality«, it is certainly the case that other, non-religious, humanistic versions of the concept can be detected in personal strivings as well. Coding strivings in this manner allows for inclusivity and is sensitive to the diversity of spiritual expression in a religiously pluralistic culture. Some other examples of spiritual

goals or »ultimate concerns« are »trying hard not to expect God to answer all my prayers«, »trying to become a more enlightened person«, »trying to bring others closer to God«, »trying to be a leader for younger women in my church«, »trying to devote time to pray every day«, and »trying to be open to God's will«, and »trying to develop my spirituality to survive the pain and physical downgrading of polio in my life.« Notice that these are phrased in terms of what the person is trying to do, implying goal-like striving toward some future state that the person achieve in varying degrees.

Such a conception of spirituality is consistent with a number of authors who, while acknowledging the diversity of meaning, affirm that a common core meaning of spirituality/religion is the recognition of a transcendent, meta-empirical dimension of reality (see Emmons, 1999, chapter 5). For example, Tillich (1957), in his classic analysis of the affective and cognitive bases of faith, contended that the essence of religion, in the broadest and most inclusive sense, is *ultimate concern*. Faith, according to Tillich, is the state of being ultimately concerned – concerns that have a sense of urgency unparalleled in human motivation. Ultimate concern is »a passion for the infinite« (p. 8), and religion »is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life« (Tillich, 1963, p. 4). In religious behavior, »man seeks the largest values in their utmost completion...the ultimate relationships« (Johnson, 1959, p. 102).

Concerns over ultimate questions of meaning and existence, purpose and value, do find expression in one form or another through personal goals. In attempting to answer questions such as »Does life have any real meaning?« or »Is there any ultimate purpose to human existence?« implicit worldview beliefs give rise to goal concerns that reflect how people »walk with ultimacy« in daily life. In personal goals that participants have generated in past research studies, they report the ultimate concerns of trying to »be aware of the spiritual meaningfulness of my life«, »discern and follow God's will for my life«, »bring my life in line with my beliefs«, and »speak up on issues concerning people who have been wronged.«

In our research, we have found that people differ in their tendency to attribute spiritual significance to their strivings, with percentages of spiritual strivings ranging from zero to nearly 50%, depending upon the nature of the sample studied. College men have the lowest level of avowed spiritual strivings, whereas older, church-going women tend to have the highest levels. In both community-based and college student samples, we have found that the proportion of intimacy strivings, generativity strivings, and spiritual strivings within a person's goal hierarchy predict greater subjective well-being (SWB), particularly higher positive affect such as happiness and joy. In each case, we examine the percentage of striving in that category relative to the total number of strivings generated. This provides a rough index of

the centrality of each motivational theme within the person's overall goal hierarchy. Spiritual strivings also predicted both marital and overall life satisfaction (Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani, 1998). But it's not just having spiritual strivings that bodes well for functioning. These goals are appraised in ways that have been shown to facilitate positive experiential and performance outcomes. They were rated as more important, requiring more effort, and engaged in for more intrinsic reasons than were non-spiritual strivings.

Why go to all this trouble of measuring spirituality through personal strivings? After all, isn't it easier just to ask someone how frequently they attend worship services, how often they pray, or whether they consider themselves to be a spiritual or a religious person? Certainly the method is more cumbersome. It is time consuming, it requires good verbal skills on the part of the respondent, it is not practical with very young or very old respondents, and it requires additional data coding. But in my mind, the advantages far outweigh these limitations, especially if the objective is to understand how people identify and search for the sacred in their daily lives. Consider two individuals, C.S. and J.I. On conventional measures of religiousness, such as worship attendance, prayer frequency, and self-rated importance of religion, they appear very similar to each other. In fact, they achieve identical scores on these indices. Yet these surface similarities obscure fundamental differences in structural and functional properties of their spiritual goal hierarchies. C.S. has the goals of »getting closer to God«, »cultivating spiritual meaning in my life« and »discerning God's will for my life.« Furthermore, he appraises these goals as extremely important, and sees them promoting his other goals in the realms of work and family. J.I., on the other hand, has included among his strivings »avoiding disappointing God«, »trying not to feel guilty when I don't live up to my spiritual ideals«, and »trying to avoid being punished for my sins.« Even though he perceives a high degree of attainment, J.I.'s more avoidantly focused strivings are likely to frustrate his spiritual life compared to A.W.'s positive, approach goals that provide him with desired incentives to move toward with likely greater enjoyment and satisfaction. Avoidance goal striving is associated with more negative psychological, behavioral, and affective outcomes (Emmons, 1999). By decomposing spiritual goals into helpful and harmful components, researchers and clinicians may be able to better understand when and how spirituality is beneficial and when it how it can be damaging.

### **Sanctifying Personal Goals**

In measuring spirituality through goals, a persistent issue has been whether to rely on my own classification of strivings as spiritual or let participants define for themselves whether a particular goal serves a spiritual purpose. Goals which, on the surface, may appear to have little to do with spiritual

needs may in fact be perceived as highly spiritual by individuals. Ken Pargament, Annette Mahoney, and their colleagues (2005) refer to this process as *sanctification*. Sanctification is a psychological process through which aspects of life are perceived by people as having spiritual character and significance. Borrowing from the initial work of Pargament and Mahoney, we assess striving sanctification by having people evaluate each goal on the following items:

- God played a role in the development of this striving.
- God is present in this striving.
- This striving is a reflection of God's will.
- I experience God through this striving.
- This striving reflects what I think God wants for me.
- This striving enables me to get closer to God.

Each statement is answered on a 1-5 scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. We then derive an average sanctification score for each separate goal, as well as an overall sanctification score for each person, summed across their individual goals. With this approach, we have been able to identify sacred goals that, on the surface, appear to have little to do with spirituality. For example, goals rated high on sanctification include: »not to dwell on my disability«, »remain as independent as possible as long as I can«, »be considerate of others«, »help others in any way I can«, and »remain helpful.« Interpersonal strivings such as these last three examples, more so than other types of strivings, tend to be viewed as having a sacred significance. We find that these are uniquely related to life outcomes such as meaning in life and emotional well-being. Strivings need not be overtly spiritual to be imbued with sacred qualities. Strivings that are sanctified are rated as more meaningful, as being supported more by others, and are related to greater commitment to others than are less sanctified strivings.

This approach to spirituality through goal striving and goal sanctification has generated important research findings in laboratories outside our own. In their sample of 150 community adults, Mahoney and Pargament (2005) found that people tended to place a high priority on strivings that they viewed as sacred. They invested more time and energy into spiritual strivings and derived greater satisfaction and sense of meaning from them relative to strivings that were more self-focused and materially oriented. Ryan and Fiorito (2003) found that avoidance spiritual goals were associated with low levels of well-being (lower self-esteem, less identity integration, and more negative affect). In an important recent study, Tix and Frazier (2005) found that striving sanctification was associated with less anxiety, depression, and hostility and with greater intrinsic religiousness. In their study, they asked participants to rate each of the strivings they listed according to the extent to which they were pursued »because of religious or spiritual reasons.« This measure of non-theistic sanctification has some ad-

vantages over the theistic measure that we have used, although it is subject to various idiosyncratic interpretations of the terms religious and spiritual. Tix and Frazier also conducted mediational analyses in which they found that sanctification of strivings mediated the relationship between intrinsic religiousness and hostility. The authors suggest that having religious and/or spiritual motives for pursuing daily tasks may lessen hostility because such motives may encourage a reframing of problems (that otherwise may provoke hostility) through connection with a higher »purpose« for engaging in such tasks.

### **The Power of Sacred Strivings**

What accounts for the unique ability of sacred strivings to predict well-being outcomes? As Pargament (2002) has convincingly argued, identifying that which is sacred and striving to protect and preserve the sacred lends deep significance to human existence, a significance that is difficult to explain through more basic psychological or social levels of description. Spiritual strivings may have a unique empowering function; people are more likely to persevere in these strivings, even under difficult circumstances. This empowering function may be stronger in groups that have limited access to other resources, such as racial minorities, the elderly, and the chronically ill (Pargament, 2002). People are more likely to take measures to protect and preserve strivings that focus on the sacred, and devote time and effort toward their realization. Spiritual strivings are also likely to provide stability and support in times of crisis by reorienting people to what is ultimately important in life (Emmons, Colby, & Kaiser, 1998). Investing goals with a sense of sacredness confers upon them a power to organize experience and to promote well-being that is absent in non-sacred strivings (Mahoney and Pargament, 2005). People testify that in today's secular culture, whether their spiritual strivings are socially accepted or socially sanctioned, they derive tremendous meaning and purpose from them.

The unique ability of spiritual strivings to promote well-being may be partially explained by the ability of religion to provide a unifying philosophy of life and to serve as an integrating force (Allport, 1950; Tillich, 1957). Conflict or fragmentation is a source of stress that can undermine purposeful striving and thus well-being. Research has documented the deleterious effect of goal conflict on well-being (Emmons & King, 1988). Although purpose is forged out of the many possibilities that life presents, these same choices can be experienced as paralyzing (see also Schwartz, 2000). Johnson (1959) describes this predicament:

Out of the very contradictions that provide freedom come the distresses of conflict. Life can never be simple or easy for a conscious person.

He must forever contend with the competing demands of a complicated world that give him no rest. Like Adam, the prototype of every man, he is lured by the unknown, tempted by untasted possibilities, seduced by the one he loves, forbidden by highest authority, caught in conflicts of desire, overcome with guilty remorse and driven forth to wrestle and sweat in a world of contradiction and uncertainty (p. 104).

Some support for the integrative role of religious striving comes from research of ours (Emmons et al., 1998). Participants in this project completed a goal instrumentality matrix in which they were asked to judge the degree to which each of their 15 personal strivings had a helpful (instrumental), harmful (conflictual), or no effect on each of their other strivings. We found that the presence of theistic spiritual strivings (strivings which explicitly refer to God) in particular were related to low levels of inter-goal conflict, and to greater levels of goal integration. Furthermore, spiritual strivings were uniquely associated with overall goal integration. No other striving content category was associated with our measures of integration. In a related finding, Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998) found that recent converts were more likely to report a positive life transformation as reflected in a more unified sense of self and a belief that their goals had become more significant and meaningful compared to nonconverts who increased in their religious faith gradually, and with religious individuals who had not experienced a recent change in their faith.

Cast in the language of cognitive goal psychology (Austin & Vancouver, 1996), spiritual strivings appeared to have a greater number of positive, excitatory connections with other goals, and fewer negative, inhibitory connections within people's overall goal systems. Without an overall organizational framework that unites separate goal strivings into a coherent structure, a person would have a very difficult time living a life that is meaningful. Religion then, has the potential to invest human existence with meaning by establishing goals and value systems that pertain to all aspects of a person's life with the potential to confer unity upon disparate experiences. We thus find evidence to support Allport's (1950) thesis that »the religious sentiment...is the portion of personality that arises at the core and that has the longest range intentions, and for this reason is capable of conferring marked integration upon personality...it is man's ultimate attempt to enlarge and to complete his own personality« (p. 142).

At the same time, not all religious or spiritual goals facilitate other goals or even one another. There is no guarantee that spiritual strivings will be well integrated within the overall self-system. Sincerely held beliefs may be held with a degree of ambivalence because they prove costly in the person's social environment. For example, in our research we found that desires to share one's faith with others were often not consonant with other goals in the person's hierarchy. Second, fundamentalist religious mindsets might en-

hance internal consistency at the cost of interpersonal disharmony. Cognitive processing associated with fundamentalist thinking is likely to lead to the person's inability to tolerate healthy skepticism or doubt. Dogmatically held beliefs can bring about a forced unity at a surface level that might obscure conflicts that still persist at a deeper, less accessible level. Third, religious strivings might make people aware of discrepancies between what they believe and what they actually do. Although ideally such discrepancies can be motivating and lead to enhanced striving and ultimately to deeper faith, discrepancies between belief and action can also engender powerful feelings of inappropriate guilt, depression, and self-flagellation. Spiritual maturity or spiritual intelligence may be the critical factor influencing the integration of spiritual concerns into a well-functioning, coherent self-system.

### **Explaining Spiritual Strivings**

So it has been established that people's motivational lives are often characterized by spiritual strivings. But why do people have spiritual strivings? What functions or purposes do they serve? Motivation deals not only with the content of behavior, but also in understanding the proximal motives that influence individual's behavior day-to-day. In accounting for religious motivation, there are two primary schools of thought. The first, which might be called the »global motive« approach, emphasizes specific motivational needs (either a few or many), while the second approach is organized around psychological systems designed to solve adaptive problems faced by our ancestors.

That religion serves to satisfy a small number of fundamental motives has been postulated by a number of different investigators. These would include basic, fundamental motives such as meaning, control, self-esteem, and relatedness or belongingness (Kirkpatrick, 2005; Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). In contrast, others have proposed a much larger number of needs. For example, Reiss (2004) proposed a multi-factorial theory in which people turn to religion for 16 different motives: Status, acceptance, social contact, tranquility, eating, curiosity, exercise, independence, power, honor, family, vengeance, order, romance, and idealism. This global motive approach, while intuitively appealing, has been criticized on the grounds that it does not conform to our innate psychological architecture (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

An approach which better reflects designed human psychology is the discrete domain-specific systems approach (Kirkpatrick, 2005). According to contemporary evolutionary psychology, the brain/mind comprises a host of domain-specific mechanisms designed by natural selection to solve adaptive problems faced recurrently by our ancestors in their environments. These mechanisms then serve to organize and direct behavior through a se-

ries of inputs and outputs. The adaptive problems include challenges related to mating (such as selection, attraction, and retention of mates), problems related to competition for resources (the negotiation of status hierarchies, formation and maintenance of alliances), problems related to acquiring assistance and support from others (selection and maintenance of friendships), and problems related to inter-group conflict. The functional organization of these different systems must differ qualitatively from one another because the adaptive problems and their solutions vary widely across different domains (Kirkpatrick, 2005). Therefore, strivings that reflect these different systems are likely to be quite distinct from each other. Evolved systems that solve the above problems are the attachment system, coalitional psychology, kinship psychology, intrasexual competition, and social exchange (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

Perhaps then, strivings solve adaptive problems in these life domains. I attempted to classify spiritual strivings in terms of the five domains of status, attachment, coalition formation, and kinship. I was able to map them in the following manner: status (»let God take control and not think I can do better,« »let go and let God,« »follow God's plan for my life, »not to expect God to answer all of my prayers«), attachment (»get closer to God,« »improve my relationship with God,« »work on things that separate me from God«), coalition formation (»help people meet God,« »help others find God working in their own lives«, »communicate my faith with others), kinship (»make our home a place that models the love of Christ,« »honor and grow my child's spirituality«, »pray with wife«) and social exchange (»thank God for blessings«, »worship God on a regular basis«, »be more thankful for what God has given to me«). The fit between individual strivings and psychological systems is a good one for these.

On the other hand, consider these strivings: »knowing God,« »live my life at all times for God,« »glorifying God«, »have fun and enjoy life because God gave me this life«, »be faithful to God«, »remember what God has done for me, »incorporate God into my daily life«, »practice the presence of God in daily activities.« These strivings do not appear to map readily on to the psychological systems. Which adaptive problems do they offer solutions to? It is not clear.

So then, do spiritual or theistic strivings solve particular adaptive problems? I think the answer at this early stage of research is mostly we don't know. Perhaps, then, a striving for the sacred is a unique motivation that does not easily fit the domain-specific psychological mechanism hypothesis. With this conclusion I echo the sentiments of Pargament (2002) who persuasively argued that the unique functions of religion cannot be reduced to a more familiar, naturalistic set of human motivations. Rather, the sacred component of religion sets it aside from other human phenomena and requires that religious motivation, and the psychological study of religion more generally, needs to be appreciated more fully and on its own terms.

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1 Portions of this article are based on the author's presidential address delivered to Division 36 at the 112<sup>th</sup> annual convention of the American Psychological Association, Honolulu, Hawaii July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2004.