MEANING MATTERS:
HOW RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS CAN INFORM SECULAR MENTAL HEALTHCARE

A Division III Thesis

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Religion and Mental Health:
An Introduction

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?


As encapsulated in these famous words of Nietzsche’s madman, the death of religion has long been foretold. With the Enlightenment-era shift from scriptural revelation to scientific truth, the historical place of religion in Western society began to crumble, shift, and evolve. Throughout the 20th century, the so-called “secularization thesis” argued that, as secular institutions replace religious functions, as church and state begin their supposed disentanglement, as scientific facts erode religious beliefs, the world will become more secular, and less religious. The problem, however, is that it hasn’t entirely come true. Religion holds on—mostly.

In a minute, I’ll show exactly how much it holds on (and how it kind of doesn’t), but before I lead you down this long-winded path, let me tell you where it ends. This work is the result of four years of undergraduate study in scientific conceptions of religion (among other things), coupled with almost a decade of my own experiences with mental illness. The jump from religion to mental health may seem arbitrary to some, but for me, the connections between
them are apparent. As I deepened my understanding of religion—in its history, evolution, effects, and causes—I kept seeing glances of hope, social support, gratitude, meditation, and other aspects of religion that echoed mental health care and treatment. I also grew to understand just how indelible religion’s marks are on humanity, and how surprisingly and uniquely capable religion has been at getting people to cooperate in the name of something greater than themselves (e.g., Norenzayan, 2013). I started to feel like, maybe, after thousands of years of practice, religion could be on to something about happiness and wellbeing that science was just beginning to figure out—after all, meditation has been practiced in the East for thousands of years, and science is only now starting to realize that this might actually be a powerful tool in combating mental and physical illnesses. Could there be something about religion that makes it beneficial to mental health?

The set up to arrive at this question with all the necessary background information will take a few pages. First, I provide some current data on how religiosity and religious affiliation is changing—around the world, but especially in the United States. Then, I will give a brief and tentative sketch of the current mental health crisis—again, mostly in the U.S. I focus on the United States for a few obvious and selfish reasons—I’m American, the people I interact with are American, and so the questions I have about the future of religion and mental healthcare are prompted mostly by trends within the United States. More than that, however, a focus on the United States allows for a slight tightening of the lens on my peek into the giant, complex, and multifaceted nature of my subjects—religion and mental health.

After this data is on the table, I’ll elaborate a little on how I arrived at a work connecting the two, before presenting some arguments on either side of the debate about religion’s relationship to mental health and wellbeing. Then comes more data. I will use the work of Harold
Koenig, Dana King, and Verna Benner Carson (2012) to outline what the empirical studies show about religion’s effects on mental health (basically, Freud got it pretty wrong). Finally, I set up the question that guides my work, and the argument I plan to make in response. Religion can (sometimes) be a powerful force of good for mental health. What does it do right? Where does it go wrong? And what, if any, insights into mental healthcare might we learn from the answers to these questions?

Religion and Mental Health: The Statistics

Religion

In many ways, the secularization thesis was not wrong. Ara Norenzayan (2013) provides a compelling case for the notion that some European countries have successfully “climbed religion’s ladder, and then kicked it away” (p. 9)—that is, that the largely socialist, welfare states of Northern Europe have so successfully cultivated cooperation, peace, and prosperity as to usurp religion’s community-building function. Indeed, religion’s decline is most evident in Western and Northern Europe—especially Denmark, Sweden, and France—where strong, stable, secular institutions have eroded the need for religion. In an article for the Huffington Post, Phil Zuckerman (2017), Professor of Sociology and Secular Studies at Pitzer College, offers the latest facts: roughly 20-40% of people in Spain, Denmark, Slovenia, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, and France claim not to believe in “any sort of spirit, God, or life-force,” church attendance in the United Kingdom is at an all-time low, with less than 2% of their population attending church any given Sunday, and both the UK and Norway now, for the first time in history, count more atheists and agnostics than believers in God among their populations. Even across the world the numbers are dropping; in the same article, Zuckerman notes that only 20% of the Japanese claim
to hold personal religious beliefs, non-religious Australians now makeup about 22% of the population, and, among New Zealanders, just under half (42%) claim no religion.

However, the non-religious still find themselves very much in the minority overall. In small pockets, secularization is on the rise, but in many other areas, the secularization thesis appears untenable. Koenig, King, and Carson (2012) cite a World Gallup Poll survey of 143 countries, which found that “over 97 percent of the populations of many of these countries indicated that religion was an important part of their daily lives” (p. 53). What’s more, while some secular populations may be growing, so are some religious groups. Mormonism is one of the world’s fastest growing religions, with an estimated growth rate of 40% per decade, and other fundamentalist and orthodox religions appear to be following suit, spreading like wildfire in some parts of the world (Norenzayan, 2013). It seems, then, that the religious landscape may not so much be in decline, as going through an enormous and complex evolution.

In the United States especially, the religious landscape is undergoing tremendous change. The outlier in almost every religious measure and one of the most economically powerful and scientifically advanced countries on earth, the United States is still deeply religious. Citing a 2001 report, Norenzayan (2013) notes that the vast majority of Americans believe in God (90%), heaven (93%), and hell (85%), and almost one in two believe in a literal interpretation of Genesis. About two-thirds of Americans indicated in a 2008 survey that religion was an important part of their daily life (Koenig, King, and Carson, 2012). Similarly, a 2004 Barna Research Group survey found that 43% of Americans had attended religious services in the last week, and many reported that they had prayed to God (83%) or read the Bible (44%) in that past week outside of religious services (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). What’s more, although regional differences in religiosity are indeed present in the U.S., they may be less drastic than
one might expect. While 87 percent of North Carolinians pray and 79 percent attend weekly religious services, these figures drop to just 73 percent and 68 percent in New York state, respectively (Pew Forum, 2007, as cited in Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012, p. 54).

Even so, the United States is not bereft of the nascent non-religious population. According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, 2015), roughly a quarter of Americans report no religious affiliation—a dramatic increase in the so-called religious “nones,” who, in 2007, made up just 16% of the population. Indeed, this trend appears to have little end in sight, as the youngest generations in the U.S. are consistently the least religious. The same Pew Research study found that 36% of “Younger” Millennials (b. 1990-96) and 34% of “Older” Millennials (b. 1981-89) report no religious affiliation.

What these numbers show, beyond affirming some measure of the secularization thesis, is that religiosity is changing not only in number, but in kind. Focusing again on the United States, only 75% of the population is religiously affiliated, but 83-90% of people believe in God, heaven, and/or hell. This points to a more complicated picture about what it means to be religious—even some those who don’t affiliate themselves with a particular religion still report religious beliefs. As the Pew survey indicates, within the burgeoning religious “nones,” roughly one third describe themselves as atheists or agnostics, while the other two thirds define themselves in no particular way. What’s interesting about this breakdown is that only 13% of all “nones” call themselves atheists (with 17% identifying as “agnostics”), meaning that, while a growing and significant number do not identify with religion, it’s a much smaller fraction of these that actively disbelieve. Besides the atheists and agnostics, 39% of America’s “nones” report that religion simply isn’t that important to them, but another 30% indicate that it is.
What we have, then, is not simply a growing number of non-religious persons, but a growing number of people who diversely identify themselves as a-religious (13% atheists), coupled with a growing number who don’t claim to believe either way (17% agnostics), a proportion who simply don’t find religion important to their lives (39%), and a group of people who indicate that religion is very much important in their lives, even if they don’t affiliate themselves with a specific tradition (30%). These “spiritual but not religious” (“SBNR”) individuals disassociate themselves from organized religion, but retain a “spiritual,” and in some cases deeply important, component of their lives. A slightly more updated Pew survey from 2017 (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017) indicates that just over a quarter of adults in the U.S. (27%) identify themselves with this “SBNR” label, a number that’s up a whopping 8% from 2012. Even as some Americans reject religion altogether, other seem to be holding on to important quasi-religious, “spiritual” components. Religion, at least in the United States, may not be dying, so much as evolving.

Mental Health

As religious attendance and affiliation declines, mental health is an ever-growing concern. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that around 300 million people around the world suffer from depression, 60 million from bipolar affective disorder, and around 23 million with schizophrenia or other psychotic disorders (“Mental disorders,” 2018). In the United States, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI; see “Mental Health By The Numbers”), almost one in five (or 43.8 million) adults experience mental illness in any given year. More specifically, NAMI reports that 18.1% of adults in the U.S. experience some form of anxiety disorder, 6.9% have had at least one major depressive episode in the past year,
and just over half of all adults experiencing a substance use disorder have a co-occurring mental illness—a statistic especially jarring in light of the current opioid epidemic. The statistics for youth in the U.S. are even more worrying. Although only around 1 in 25 adults experience a severe mental illness, it is estimated that 1 in 5 youth aged 13-18 experience a severe mental disorder at some point in their lives ("Mental Health By The Numbers").

Not only do a significant number of people experience a mental disorder, but there is also some evidence that the incidence is rising. A 2017 news release from the WHO notes that the 300 million people living with depression worldwide shows an increase of 18% from 2005 to 2015 ("Depression, Let’s Talk," 2017). Within the United States, mental health issues are a growing concern. An analysis from the U.S. Burden of Disease Collaborators in 2013 found that the toll of mental disorders, calculated in terms of premature death and disability, has grown in the past two decades (Higgins, 2017). This increase in mental health issues and burdens is especially apparent among younger generations. The number of college students reporting “overwhelming anxiety” jumped from 50% in 2011 to 62% in 2016 (Mahnken, 2017). Between 1997 and 2011, hospitalizations for mood disorders in persons aged 17 and under jumped by 68% (Mahnken, 2017), and the incidence of severe depression among youths rose from 5.9% in 2012 to 8.2% in 2015 ("The State of Mental Health in America"). Though it represents a much broader measure of quality of life than mental health specifically, happiness in the U.S. also appears to be declining. According to the World Happiness Report, the United States fell from 3rd happiest among the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries in 2007, to 19th in 2016 ("World Happiness Report 2017").

The consequences of these mental health issues are devastating. Mood disorders are the third most common reason for hospitalization among people aged 18-44, and serious mental
illness costs the United States an estimated $193.2 billion in lost earnings each year ("Mental Health By The Numbers"). Of course, one of the most devastating consequences of mental illness is the high rate of suicide; the same report from NAMI notes that suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the U.S., the third leading cause for people age 10-14, and the second leading cause for people 15-24. The suicide rate has increased a staggering 24% since 1999 (Fox, 2016), and suicide rates among teen girls are at a 40-year high (Fox, 2017).

*Mental Health Treatment*
What’s more, we don’t have a good way of dealing with this mental health crisis. NAMI reports that only 41% of adults with a mental illness had received any form of mental health services in the past year, although this number rises to 62.9% among those with serious mental illnesses ("Mental Health By The Numbers"). For children (ages 8-15), only half receive treatment. Although Mental Health America reports that healthcare reform in recent years has increased Americans’ access to services, most still lack access to care. They note that, “even in Maine, the state with the best access, 41.4% of adults with a mental illness do not receive treatment” ("The State of Mental Health in America"). As a result, jails become the United States’ mental health institutions: estimates show that 70% of young people in the juvenile justice system have at least one mental health condition, and about 20% of adults in state or local prisons have a mental health condition ("Mental Health By The Numbers"). A number of those living with mental illness end up living on the street; NAMI’s report shows that a quarter of all homeless adults staying in shelters have a serious mental illness, and almost half have a serious mental illness and/or substance use disorder ("Mental Health By The Numbers").
Even for those who have access to and receive treatment for mental illnesses, the treatment is not always effective. Psychiatrist Edmund Higgins notes that, based on his own clinical experience, “mental health treatment does improve symptoms and quality of life by about 20 to 40 percent for most patients,” which is “a whole lot better than nothing but not nearly good enough” (Higgins, 2017). Common treatments include medication and psychotherapy, and these can be powerful and life saving treatments. However, they are far from perfect, and their effects are often more moderate than one would hope. In the case of medications, antidepressants are commonly prescribed for depression, anxiety, and other health conditions. However, the mechanism by which these medications work is not entirely understood (see Burnett, 2017 for more), and their effectiveness is actually controversial, with some arguing that their benefits have been oversold, and that, in reality, the costly side effects outweigh the benefits (Carroll, 2018).

Studies cited by the National Institute of Health (NIH) report that, in those with moderate to severe depression, antidepressants worked better than placebo at improving symptoms of depression in only around 20% of cases and only prevent relapse better than a placebo in 27% of cases (“Depression: How effective are antidepressants?”). In the data cited here, 20-40 out of 100 people taking a placebo showed an improvement in symptoms within 6-8 weeks, and 40-60 out of 100 people taking an antidepressant showed an improvement in the same time period. In the case of depression relapse, about 50 out of 100 people receiving a placebo experienced a relapse within two years, compared to only 23 people receiving antidepressant treatment. These numbers support the conclusion generally found (see Carroll, 2018, and “Depression: How effective are antidepressants?” for more): yes, antidepressants work better than nothing, but they don’t work
all that well. After all, the data from the NIH shows that around half of people on antidepressants did not show an improvement in symptoms, and a quarter still experienced a relapse.

With regard to psychotherapy, some forms, especially cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has been shown to be an effective treatment for anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses. However, psychotherapy can be expensive and takes repeated hour-long sessions over the course of months to produce its benefits. Moreover, some troubling data show that as many as 69% of therapists in the United States use CBT only part of the time, or in combination with other therapies (Brown, 2013), and this problem extends beyond the United States. This suggests that even people who have access to therapy may not be receiving the kind of therapy, CBT, that appears to be most effective (see Brown, 2013, for more). Because of this, Glenn Waller, chairman of the psychology department at the University of Sheffield, worries that “a large number of people with mental health problems that could be straightforwardly addressed are getting therapies that have very little chance of being effective” (Brown, 2013).

I realize that this brief overview of mental health, particularly in the United States, is a rough and imprecise sketch of a complex and nuanced phenomenon. Space limitations do not allow for the in-depth discussion that this topic deserves. However, I hope that my point can be seen in spite of the hurried description: mental health, especially in the United States, is a major, and possibly growing, problem without an adequate and accessible solution. A fifth of the population suffers from mental illness, less than half get any form of treatment, and the treatment they do receive is not guaranteed to work for them. But what does any of this have to do with religion and the changing landscape thereof? Could there be any relationship between religion and mental health? And might there be any insights into mental healthcare that we can glean from this integral and uniquely human phenomenon?
Religion and Mental Health: The Question

By juxtaposing the data on religion and mental health, and how they have evolved in recent years, I am not implicitly arguing for a direct, causal relation between the two. That is, I do not argue that the relative decline in religiosity in the United States has directly led to the mental health issues we see today. The reasons for the growing mental health crisis in the United States are complicated, and to say that the decline in or evolution of religiosity is to blame for it is far too simplistic. There are many other factors, from the rise of social media, to the recent and current geopolitical turmoil, or the increasing economic inequality in the United States, that likely play a greater role in explaining the growing mental health concerns than does declining religiosity. Nevertheless, and in the context of the rest of this work, I do offer the idea that there could be some relation between the two, or that they might at least not be entirely unrelated phenomena.

More precisely, however, I place these two sections next to each other to describe to the reader the two paths that coincided to produce this work. The jump from religion to mental health may seem arbitrary to some, but I assure you, the decision to study the interaction between them was not an erratic one. As I began this project, I knew that my interests lay in religious studies—particularly the newer fields studying the topic from psychological and cognitive scientific viewpoints. I also found the changes religion is undergoing sociologically to be fascinating, in part because the “spiritual but not religious” group makes up a disproportionate number of the people in my life. I had always thought about religion and spirituality, but whenever I asked my friends about what they believed, I received the same answer; something
along the lines of “I don’t believe in God, but I believe in something.” But that “something” was never elaborated upon.

Instead, my social media feeds were often filled with a dizzying array of astrological convictions and appropriated Eastern religious or spiritual concepts. When Mercury goes into retrograde, twitter erupts. Popular magazines tell you your horoscope, what signs you’re compatible with, which ones to stay away from, and that of course your ex was a Gemini—it was never going to last! The idea of karma is thrown around ubiquitously, and every other dorm room on campus has a Mandala tapestry on the walls. Mindfulness meditation now comes in app form, and so does yoga.

Of course, none of this is hard evidence about the spiritual lives of my peers—and I don’t take it to be. Just because we read horoscopes and repeatedly remind each other that “Karma’s a bitch,” doesn’t mean that any of us actually believe in these notions—especially not in the way a religious person believes in their religious teachings. Nevertheless, I find the quasi-spirituality of my somewhat religion-phobic peers intriguing. Why are these ideas so popular, especially among a group that calls itself the least religious? Moreover, why am I, someone who explicitly does not believe in any form of astrology or supernatural entities, still finding myself peeking into my horoscope in hopes of a prophecy of good fortune?

While I grew curious about religion, philosophy, and spirituality, I was also contending with my own mental illness. I know first-hand of the false promise of medications, the importance of (expensive, time consuming, and slow) therapy, and, unfortunately, the lack of any real (let alone easy) solution. But while I studied religion’s role in history, society, and the brain, I was also discovering personally the mental health benefits of meditation, of sharing my story with others who understood, and of practicing gratitude and optimism. When I wanted to
stubbornly hold on to old grudges, my therapist reminded me that forgiveness of others is more about relieving my own anger than it is about softening someone else’s guilt. When my therapist told me to start keeping a gratitude journal and write it in each night, my first thought was, “isn’t that what religious people already do each night when they pray? Thank God, and ask for a brighter future?” Don’t religions already tend to encourage us to be hopeful and optimistic, to practice gratitude and forgiveness, and to come together each week to celebrate what’s important and sacred about life?

Moreover, I found through my experiences that I more than once had to contend with my “analytic” mind—the side of me that looked at a decade’s worth of data, of how much I had struggled, and wondered if I was ever going to be better. When my (depression-fueled, and therefore maybe less analytic or unbiased than I’d like to think) mind told me I was never going to get better, I would sit in awe of my therapist, who, sitting across from me, would smile kindly and, with a conviction I could not understand, tell me that I was of course going to get better.

In this sense, one of the most important lifelines I’ve had throughout my quest for happiness was this kind of hope—the irrational, unsteady faith in my own future. Even when it felt like there was little reason to suppose that tomorrow would ever be any better than today, the only road I had left to go down was one that believed as hard and as deeply as possible that, somehow, I’d be okay. As an atheist, then and now, I did not have a guiding, all-powerful, all-loving figure to steady my hopes on (as close as my wonderful therapist could come to that), and I did not have scripture to comfort me when the world felt dark. But is there any reason to think
that my journey through mental health treatment may have been different for me if I had? Does religiosity have any connection to mental health\(^1\) and wellbeing?\(^2\)

*Religion and Mental Health: The Debate*

As it turns out, I was not the first person in the world to pose this question. Before modern medicine, supernatural explanations and treatments of illness were common, and miraculous faith healing has been claimed time and again throughout history. Even today, hospitals still often bear the name of a religious figure, and many people around the world pray for better health. Moreover, several holy texts contain passages that promise health and wellbeing to devoted followers. In short, many people believe that there is some connection between religion and health.

Throughout the 20th century, however, a different view of religion’s relationship with health was common. Sigmund Freud famously called religion the “universal obsessional neurosis of humanity,” and argued that religion grew out of a kind of Oedipus complex (Freud, 1927, p. 43, as cited in Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012, p. 60). Psychologist Albert Ellis argued that “religion goes hand in hand with the basic irrational beliefs of human beings. These keep them dependent, anxious, and hostile, and thereby create and maintain their neuroses and psychoses” (Albert Ellis, 1980, as cited in Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012, p. 61). Richard Dawkins argues in *The God Delusion* (2006) that, since God does not exist, belief in God is delusional—akin to a

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\(^1\) For the sake of this work, “mental health conditions” will be understood as only depression and anxiety-related disorders. These make up the vast majority of mental illnesses, and the majority of research on religion and mental health. Since space limits my investigation of all mental illnesses, these will have to suffice.

\(^2\) While the genesis of my investigation began with religion’s relationship to mental health, I expanded it to include religion’s relationship with wellbeing in general due to, 1. the fact that higher wellbeing also means lower anxiety and depression, so the term “wellbeing” can in some sense be analogous to fewer mental health issues, and 2. because so much of the data on religion and mental health actually measures religion and wellbeing. Therefore, unless otherwise stated, wellbeing will be used as a catch-all term covering high life satisfaction, positive mental and emotional states, and low mental illness symptomology. It describes the generally happier and more content lives.
mental illness. This notion leads him to quote Robert Pirsig in saying, “when one person suffers from a delusion it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called religion” (as cited in Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012, p. 62).

The reason for their contempt is understandable. As Koenig, King, and Carson (2012) note,

Many religious doctrines are intended to cause guilt in followers who fail to adhere… [and sometimes] guilt is induced for less sacred purposes, such as power, control, and economic gain. Furthermore, certain beliefs, if carried out literally or to the extreme, can result in personal harm or in harm to others. For these and other reasons, skeptics argue that religion has no place in the practice of medicine or health care, and say that research linking religion and good health is flawed, inconsistent, and exaggerated. (p. 58)

It is also true that certain forms of mental illness often explicitly incorporate religion. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder can have religious expressions, as when patients have a compulsion to say a prayer before they leave their house or read a passage from the Bible obsessively.

Schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders can also have religious delusions; Koenig, King, and Carson (2012) cite data showing that “in those with schizophrenia, 25 to 39 percent of psychotic patents have religious delusions… [and] in patients with acute mania (bipolar disorder), 15 to 22 percent have religious delusions” (p. 66). There is also the real fear that religion dissuades people from seeking medical help. Indeed, Koenig, King, and Carson (2012) call this “the biggest concern” with regard to religion and health: “With good intentions, religious persons may seek to rely on their faith, trust in God, and prayer, rather than medicine, when dealing with a medical conditions” (p. 63).

However, few if any of those arguing that religion is detrimental to health came to their conclusions by relying on any empirical evidence. Of course, those who do believe prayer heals them are not relying on empirical data either. So what do the data say?
The Data

I’ll spoil the punchline for you: coming as a surprise to early investigators, religion generally seems to have a positive relationship with wellbeing and mental health. However, the data behind this conclusion is complicated and messy, for a number of reasons. Before discussing some of these issues with the data, however, I will present an overview of the findings. The overview I provide is taken directly from Koenig, King, and Carson’s (2012) *Handbook of Religion and Health.* This 900+ page reference book is the second edition of the authors’ work to document the wealth of studies investigating religion’s effects on health. I rely on their data because the complexity of both religiosity and mental health or wellbeing make easy conclusions about their relationship impossible. One study is not enough to conclude that religion does or does not have an effect on mental health, so the massive meta-analysis provided by the authors will allow me to lay the groundwork as briefly as possible. The first edition of this handbook reviewed over twelve hundred research studies, conducted from the 1800’s up to the year 2000, that investigated links between religion and health. The second edition builds on the first, by reviewing another twenty-one hundred studies conducted between 2001 and 2010.

As can be seen by the number of studies reviewed in the first versus the second handbook, research into the connections between religion and health have blossomed over the past twenty years. Once called the “anti-tenure factor,” quantitative investigations of religion and health are now making their way into the mainstream, as the authors report that “private foundations, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Science Foundation are currently supporting research on R/S and health” (p. 5).³ In light of this research, health professionals,

³ “R/S” is the term Koenig, King, and Carson use to refer to religion and spirituality, where individuals labeled “spiritual” are defined as “a subset of deeply religious persons whose way of life centers on and exemplifies the teachings of their faith, where faith is rooted in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or any other
healthcare institutions, and medical schools have begun to incorporate spirituality in their patient assessments and courses.

The studies reviewed in the second Handbook cover the years between 2001 and 2010, and were identified using a number of strategies. MEDLINE and PsychINFO searches were used to systematically identify quantitative studies on the religion-health relationship. Additionally, the authors reached out to other researchers in the field, inquiring about research they’d conducted over the course of the decade. This resulted in over twenty-one hundred quantitative studies being reviewed, a number the authors estimate to cover around 75% of the total existing research. They focus only on quantitative studies because qualitative ones were too numerous to include, and because “they almost uniformly indicate that religious or spiritual factors play an important and positive role in well-being” (p. 130).

Each of these 2100 quantitative studies were carefully examined, and then assigned a quality rating between 1 and 10 to signify its overall quality. Higher scores indicated studies that “utilized systematic, random, or probability sampling; those with larger sample sizes; those with appropriate and uncontaminated measures; longitudinal studies; clinical studies (if they had a solid design and execution); and those that used appropriate statistical tests that controlled for relevant confounders” (p. 9). Of course, all 2100 studies include those that explore not only religion and mental health, but religion and physical health. For the sake of space here, and in line with the more narrow use of “mental illness” used in this work, I am only including their data with regard to religion’s relationship with wellbeing, anxiety, and depression. This means I recognized religious tradition, including some of the new spiritual traditions that have arisen during the twentieth century” (p. 46). Therefore, although the authors use the term “spiritual,” their data does not include those who call themselves “spiritual but not religious,” or any other form of spirituality outside of religious traditions under the “R/S” label. Religion, for the authors, is defined as involving “beliefs, practices, and rituals related to the sacred” and may also “involve beliefs about spirits, both good (angels) and bad (demons). Religion may be organized and practiced within a community, or it may be practiced alone and in private. In either case, religion originates in an established tradition that arises out of a community with common beliefs and practices” (p. 37).
have cut out their sections on physical health (for obvious reasons), but also on suicide, psychotic disorders, substance use disorders, and personality disorders.

What follows is a dry summary of the findings Koenig, King, and Carson (2012) report in their handbook, with regard to the three categories described above.

**Wellbeing**

In the first edition of the *Handbook*, the authors found 102 studies examining the relationship between religious involvement and wellbeing. Of these, 81 (79%) found significant positive relationships. Of the 48 studies the authors gave a quality rating of 7 or higher to, 43 (90%) observed higher wellbeing among the more religious. Since the year 2000, hundreds more studies have examined the religiousity-wellbeing relationship. Of the 224 quantitative studies reviewed by the authors in this second handbook, 175 (78%) found positive associations between greater religiosity and greater wellbeing, while 8 (4%) reported mixed findings, two reported what the authors describe as “complex relationships difficult to interpret” (p. 131), 38 (17%) found no significant association, and just two reported a negative relationship. Of the 72 studies the authors determined as having a quality rating of 7 or higher, 55 (76%) found positive relationships, 10 (14%) found no association, 6 reported mixed findings, and one reported a negative relationship.

A common issue with studies examining religion’s relationship with mental health is that many are cross-sectional in design, meaning that they measure only correlation and not causation. In light of this, the authors also provide four studies (Wink & Dillon, 2003; Kristeller et al., 2005; Richards et al., 2006; Snoep, 2008) that were prospective or clinical in design. Prospective studies, which follow a group of individuals over time and measure how certain variables change and effect others, and clinical trials, which in this case involved specific
interventions, are valuable in research because the nature of their design allows for causal pathways to be determined. In the case of the four studies reported by the authors, all four found that religiosity or religious interventions led to higher reports of wellbeing. Therefore, while conclusions about the wellbeing-religion relationship remain mostly correlative, there is nevertheless some data that shows that religion may indeed cause or lead to higher wellbeing.

Anxiety

Between the first and second edition of the *Handbook*, a total of 299 studies were found to have examined the relationship between religiosity and anxiety. Of these, 147 (49%) reported inverse relationships between R/S and anxiety, or decreases in anxiety in response to R/S interventions, and 33 (11%) reported positive relationships between religion and anxiety. Of all these studies, 67 were determined by the authors to have a quality rating of 7 or higher, 38 (57%) of which found an inverse relationship between religiosity and anxiety, and 7 (10%) found greater anxiety to be associated with greater religiosity. When examined in terms of study design, the authors note that a total of 41 experimental studies or clinical trials have been conducted, 29 (71%) of which found that an R/S intervention lowered anxiety.

Depression

In the first edition of the *Handbook*, the authors examined a total of 104 studies that explored the relationship between religious involvement and depression. Ninety-six of these were observational studies (71 were cross-sectional, and 25 prospective), of which 61 (64%) found a significant negative relationship between religious involvement and higher rates of depression or depressive symptoms, 15 found no association, 4 found a positive relationship between religiosity and depression, and 16 reported mixed findings. Of the 25 that were
prospective cohort studies, 18 (72%) found that greater religious involvement predicted lower rates of depression over time. The remaining 8 studies of the 104 total presented in the first *Handbook* were clinical trials. Of these, 5 found that depressed patients receiving religious/spiritual interventions recovered significantly faster than subjects receiving secular treatments or controls. In terms of the quality of these 104 studies, the authors assigned 54 with a quality rating of 7 or higher. 39 (72%) of these high-quality studies reported significantly less depression or a reduction of depression in response to a religious or spiritual intervention, one found significantly more depression, ten studies reported mixed findings, and four found no significant association.

In this second edition, 339 new studies examining the relationship between religious involvement and depression were discussed. Of these, 272 cross-sectional studies were reviewed, 170 (63%) of which reported a significant negative relationship between religious involvement and higher rates of depression or depressive symptoms, 60 (22%) of which found no association, 17 (6%) found greater depression among the more religious, 22 (8%) reported mixed findings, and 3 (1%) reported complex findings that were difficult to interpret.

Of the 45 prospective cohort studies described by the authors, 21 (47%) found that greater religious involvement predicted lower rates of depression over time, 5 (11%) found religious associated with higher levels of depression, four (9%) reported mixed findings, one reported findings too complex to interpret, and 14 (31%) found no association. Finally, 22 clinical trials or experimental studies were examined: 14 (64%) found that depressed patients receiving religious or spiritual interventions experienced better outcomes than controls or those receiving standard treatment, five reported that religious or spiritual interventions exhibited
similar results to standard treatments or controls, two found that R/S interventions were inferior to standard treatments, and one reported mixed findings.

In terms of quality, the authors assigned only 124 of the total 339 studies with a quality rating of 7 or higher. This shows a slight decline in quality from the studies examined in the first *Handbook*, which the authors attribute to the increasing popularity of R/S research (that is, with more receptivity of journals to publish R/S research, more may allow lower-quality research). Nevertheless, the authors report that, of the 124 high-quality studies, 80 (65%) reported inverse relationships between religion and depression, 12 (10%) found positive relationships between religion and depression, 20 (16%) found no association, 11 (9%) reported mixed findings, and one reported complex results.

In total, the authors found 443 quantitative studies exploring the relationship between religious involvement and depression before and after the year 2000. Of these, 271 (61%) found that religious involvement was associated with less depression, predicted faster recovery from depression, or that R/S interventions reduced depressive symptoms faster than secular treatments or controls. On the other hand, 22% of these studies found no association, and 6% found religious involvement to be linked to greater depression. As the authors conclude:

> It is evident that the majority of these studies find that religious involvement is inversely related to depression in cross-sectional analyses, predict less depression over time in longitudinal analyses, and when incorporated into R/S interventions, facilitate more rapid resolution of depression. However, there is a significant minority of studies that report otherwise… even some very well done studies find that religious involvement is either unrelated to depression, or in some cases, is positively related. (p. 159)

What their comment notes is important: conclusions about religion’s effects on wellbeing, especially depression, are difficult because the evidence does not entirely agree. Often, authors will attribute this inconsistency to the different definitions of religion operationalized in the study or to different religious measures used. This seems to be a reasonable explanation. Indeed,
in light of the complex nature of “religion,” it seems almost obvious. Not all religion everywhere is going to act the same for each individual’s wellbeing or mental health. People, and religion, are simply too varied. Furthermore, especially in the case of depression, it is impossible to disentangle (in cross-sectional studies) whether religion makes people more depressed, or whether depressed people turn more to religion in their times of need. Before figuring out what to do with this inconsistency, and with the data in general, I need to briefly provide a disclaimer about these studies.

Some Issues

I said earlier that there were some issues with the studies on religion and wellbeing. Indeed, as I noted, the vast majority of them are cross-sectional in design, meaning that they cannot conclude that religion causes mental health or wellbeing. Instead, they can only describe how it is associated with it. It could be that better mental health causes people to be more religious, or that some third variable is mediating the relationship between the two. However, the clinical and prospective studies cited by Koenig, King, and Carson appear, broadly, to back up the claim that religion may indeed cause better mental health in certain populations or situations. Therefore, the consistency with which religion is associated with wellbeing and mental health, especially when coupled with the results of these experimental studies, I believe still permits an exploration of how it might be causing or leading to it.

Nevertheless, there are some other issues that can contaminate this conclusion. For one, the vast majority of psychological studies that are conducted use WEIRD populations (see Norenzayan, 2013, for more). That is, they are conducted on populations that are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. In fact, one estimate claims that 96% of all
research participants come from Western industrialized countries, which represent only 12% of the world’s population (Norenzayan, 2013). In the case of this work, this also means that the majority of these studies probably focused on Abrahamic religions, and, even then, more often on Christian ones. Although more and more scholars are working to close this gap in psychology of religion research, and indeed, many, many studies covered by the *Handbook* have included non-Abrahamic religions, it is important to keep in mind. As a result, this study cannot pretend to be describing religion in general. I doubt any study reviewed by the *Handbook* looked at indigenous populations or religions, and as such, there are thousands of religions that I cannot hope to include in my argument when I say “religion” boosts wellbeing. Therefore, these studies mostly focus on Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and compare the levels and kinds of religiosity among adherents of these religions, and often in contrast with non-religious, secular people (who, it may be worth noting, likely live in cultures where one of these five religions is or was the dominant religious ideology).

Finally, there is the issue of reproducibility that is currently gripping the field of psychology, among others. This has led to some panic about how much we can trust the results of some important studies. If the results of a study can’t be reproduced by another researcher, then the validity of the original results becomes questionable. There is also the problem of publication bias, an issue, again, not unique to psychology. Publication bias is the term for journals’ tendency to publish positive results (i.e., results that show the hypothesis to be true), and for researchers to tend to hide away negative results (those that might show no significant findings). Within the realm of psychology of religion, it is also possible that a researcher or journal may have some kind of religious bias, which could further problematize the results.
These are all real and worrying problems. However, they are of course not problems I can hope to solve here. My question led me to psychology, so in psychology I must situate my answer. Although these studies may not be perfect, I have to use what’s available. As such, we have to keep in mind the imperfect nature of these studies, even while we explore their findings, and the implications thereof. Descending into the realms of religion, mental health, and psychology, we move into messy, imprecise, and contested territory. In this territory, the only place we can hope to find our answers, we can only remain cautious, and get comfortable with the fact that the only “answers” we can hope to walk away with will be broad sketches, not solid and precise conclusions.

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Religion and Mental Health: An Argument

In spite of these issues, and in spite of some significant contradictory findings, it seems that we can come to a semi-answer to my original question of whether or not religion has a positive effect on mental health and wellbeing: yes, mostly. Around 80% of the time, religion seems to be associated with higher wellbeing, about half the time it is associated with or leads to less anxiety, and about 60% of the time religion is associated with or leads to less depression. At this point, we have answered some of my initial questions about how religion might relate to mental health. In doing so, however, more, and more interesting, questions have arisen. Namely: why? Why is religion (sometimes) related with better mental health? What does religion do right, and, when it fails to lead to higher wellbeing, what does it do wrong? Moreover, what could we secular people learn from religion’s effects on mental health and wellbeing?
Fitting puzzle-piece possibilities into a common framework

The question of what mediates this general relationship, what religion does that seems to boost well-being, is what many studies in recent years have attempted to answer, and they frequently take the following form: “religion is associated with better mental health because religion provides social support” or “because religion provides a meaningful belief system” or “because religion provides coping mechanisms.” They use one study, and make one small claim about one small way in which this broad and complex idea of religion influences the broad and complex notion of mental health.

My focus in the present study is not to follow in their footsteps and claim that the relationship between religion and well-being is mediated by a single aspect of religion, with an effect on a single aspect of well-being. Instead, I will argue that not only are there multiple aspects of religion that enhance multiple measures of well-being, but that religion is particularly adept at bringing many of these aspects together, and reinforcing them. The association between religion and mental health, then, is due not to some specific aspect of religion, but to the fact that religion bundles together disparate practices that are known to aid mental health, and, moreover, that the conjunction of these aspects and of common religious behaviors and beliefs serve to reinforce themselves, creating a positive feedback loop. As an example, a belief in a meaningful world correlates with mental well-being, as does having a social support system. Religion not only provides both of these at once, but it also allows these two aspects to reinforce each other. The more one associates with a community of people that share their meaningful world view, the more one believes in and is committed to that world view. The more one is committed to a world view that they share with their community, the more one participates in their community.
I do not want to describe why church attendance was related to better wellbeing in one small sample in one specific study. I do not want to say that religion helps mental health only because it provides people with a social support system; this seems patently false. The socially supportive nature of many religious communities of course seems like it would play a significant role, but it is not the only explanation for religion’s effects. Other people can benefit from religion’s ability to confer a sense of certainty and order about the universe. My problem is that I doubt that we could or should try to disentangle one of these explanations from the other—one individual likely gets wellbeing benefits from their religion in a number of interconnected ways.

Of course, isolating these explanations from each other in order to understand them more deeply is a valuable goal; it is simply not mine. Furthermore, I am not sure it’s the goal that the field should focus on at this time. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the field of psychology of religion is in desperate need of a common paradigmatic theoretical framework. While countless studies are being churned out that give us more and more data on the many ways we can measure religiosity, mental health, and how they interact, the studies have yet to be integrated into a common structure. Until they are, we cannot get a broader understanding of why religion has this general relationship with wellbeing—we can only look at individual puzzle pieces.

*Meaning as a general framework*

My question was broad and general in nature; as such, I want to offer a broad and general explanation. I want to offer a possible theoretical framework that gives meaning and explanation to the psychological literature that demonstrates a generally positive relationship between religion and mental health; that is, to explore why we see such correlations consistently. The
framework I have chosen is that of *meaning*—religiosity is associated with better wellbeing because when certain characteristically religious ideas, beliefs, and practices are incorporated into a person’s *meaning system*, they tend to experience a more *meaningful life.*[^4] A meaningful life, in turn, provides a solid base from which wellbeing and mental health can flourish.

In some ways, then, my theoretical framework already chooses certain explanations of religion’s benefits over others—i.e., those unrelated to meaning. However, I will argue that meaning not only incorporates many of the possible explanations, but it serves as a good language with which to talk about religion (in its many forms) and mental health (in its many forms). We can translate the benefits of social support into the language of meaning in life, as I will show, as well as the benefits of a certain and ordered understanding of the universe. A meaning framework is general enough to allow us to talk between the realms of religion and mental health, and to incorporate many different factors that mediate this relationship. In this way, it allows us to answer in the way I did above—that religion boosts wellbeing, not for one specific reason, but because it brings together a number of different factors known to contribute to wellbeing, and allows for them to reinforce each other. Within this framework, we can hopefully begin to understand how these smaller factors work, how religion provides them, and how religion is uniquely capable of maintaining them, which then allows for the positive feedback loop to continue.

It will, I hope, also allow us to situate the negative findings—those that show no association or a negative association between religion and mental health. This data is important to understand religion’s relationship with wellbeing and should not be discounted. Religion sometimes helps and sometimes hurts. But why does it help when it does, and why does it hurt?

[^4]: These terms will be described in detail in the following chapter. For now, *meaning* and *meaning in life* can be understood colloquially, and *meaning systems* can be understood as analogous to *worldviews.*
when it does? Perhaps the socially supportive benefits are not enough to help the person too wracked with religious doubt to really feel as though they are a part of that community. Perhaps a community you feel you belong to is not enough to undo the effects of maladaptive religious beliefs.

Moreover, a meaning framework allows us to explore how we might pull religion’s benefits out of religion itself, and appropriate their benefits for secular meaning systems and secular mental healthcare. If religious social support provides mental health benefits, how might we use a similar kind of social support in mental healthcare? If religious beliefs boost wellbeing, how might we use this knowledge? Answering these questions requires understanding the specific qualities of religious social support and religious beliefs, while also recognizing that the benefits of each are a part of a larger, interconnected framework of religion’s influences on wellbeing.

Of course, there are likely other mediators between the religion-mental health relationship that cannot be translated into a meaning framework, and there will be many mediators that I do not have time to discuss in these pages. In this sense, then, the meaning framework and this work are neither exhaustive nor perfect. I hope, however, that it is nevertheless an adequate sketch of a possible framework—a first draft, a hopeful consideration. Karen Armstrong (2015) quotes a British commercial with the phrase, “the weather does a lot of different things—and so does religion” (p. 16). My hope is that a meaning framework will allow us to understand the many different things in context with one another, as well as on their own.
This Work: The Outline of an Argument

The first chapter describes in some detail the theoretical backdrop of the meaning framework and this work. I will describe what I mean by meaning, utilizing the work of other scholars throughout meaning literature. I will also describe the concept of meaning in life that I use to build my argument around. This conception is taken directly from the work of Frank Martela and Michael F. Steger (2016), who attempt to arrive at a generally agreed upon notion of this concept by drawing from other conceptions in the literature. Their notion of meaning in life breaks it down into three interdependent, though separable, subconstructs: coherence, purpose, and significance. I will describe what is meant by each of these, and how meaning in life in general relates to wellbeing and mental health.

I will then describe the term meaning systems. This idea comes from the work of Crystal L. Park (2005), who advocates for a meaning systems approach to religion. I will describe what this approach to religion means and looks like, and why this approach offers a much-needed way to incorporate the work of many different psychologists of religion into a common framework. I will also describe how a meaning systems approach to mental health can work in similar ways, and how meaning systems relate to meaning in life.

The next three chapters will take on each subconstruct of meaning in life one at a time. For each, I first provide a slightly more in-depth description of the component, why it’s important in our lives, and how it relates to better wellbeing. I will then describe how religions can often be seen as providing each of these components, and moreover, how there might be some aspects of religion that make it uniquely suited to provide and maintain these components. In this way, each chapter describes why religion, insofar as it provides and maintains these components, and does so in unique ways, has a generally positive effect on wellbeing that other,
secular meaning systems may not. However, I hope that understanding the benefits for each of these components that are unique to religion may give us some inspiration as to how we could manufacture them outside of religion. This is of course not always possible, but then, understanding the unique ways religion provides meaning in life would explain why religion does it so well.

Finally, I will conclude by bringing the three subconstructs back together, and summarize how religion is capable of providing and maintaining each of these, and how conferring all three together—and allowing them and other aspects of religion to reinforce each other—may explain why religion tends to be associated with happier, healthier people. I will conclude by leaving the reader with three things: some possible ideas about how we could use some of the insights gained by understanding religion’s relationship with mental health to help our own mental health and mental healthcare; an understanding of the importance of meaning in our lives, and how we can work to find and maintain it; and a plea for a more nuanced and flexible understanding of religion. Many pockets of academia and some prominent academics have for too long written off religion as one kind of thing, as something with no business associating with the secular world, and as toxic. All of these ideas about religion are patently false, potentially dangerous, and too easily write off the experiences of 97% of the rest of the world. We cannot understand humanity if we do not include an unbiased understanding of one of humanity’s oldest and most impactful phenomenon—religion.

Some Disclaimers

Any work in the realm of religion is bound to draw fierce opinions from many sides. Moreover, the nature of this work might at times appear to be claiming or doing something that I
am not actually claiming or doing. As such, I feel its important to remind the reader what I am and am not doing.

I am *not* in any way describing the origins of religion. I have my own opinions about this, and this work is in accord with them, but it neither relies on a particular understanding of religion’s origins, nor offers one.⁵ I do not claim that religion arose *because* it makes people happier, makes them worry less, or helps them make sense of the world. I am describing what it *does*, not why it arose.

I am not really even describing all of religion. As I said earlier, the data this work builds upon is not perfect, and not a reflection of religion in all its forms. The data focuses mostly on religion as we understand it in the Western world, and as it stems from the five major world religions, or in areas heavily influenced by these. As such, I do not purport to describe religion as it is in indigenous cultures, in hunter-gatherer societies, or in each and every one of the estimated 10,000 religions that exist in the world today (Norenzayan, 2013).

I am also not talking much about doctrinal religion. Although at times I refer to religious doctrine and how some might instill optimistic beliefs among those who adhere to it, doctrinal religion is somewhat of a different beast from lived religion. Lived religion refers to religion as people actually live and practice it. Since I hope to investigate how religion influences people’s lives, I focus much more on lived religion than on doctrinal. As an example: according to Christian doctrine, God is supposed to be all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, and existing outside of time and space. However, many Christians speak to or about God as though he does exist in space and time, as though they are closer to him when they are in church than in a movie theater, and as though he responds to them in space and time. What matters more than what

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⁵ My own opinion is that religion has evolutionary and cognitive roots. For more on this, check out the wonderful works of Ara Norenzayan (2013), Pascal Boyer (2001), and Lee Kirkpatrick (2005).
Christianity espouses is how Christians actually act, believe, and live. This means that Christianity can provide a coherent understanding of the world to its believers, even though the Bible has many, many points of incoherent inconsistencies.

I am not describing what religion does in its entirety. In part, I say this because I am not describing what religion does on levels other than the individual (i.e., although religion has certain functions on the societal level, I will not discuss these insofar as the societal functions of religion do not relate to how it functions for the individual’s wellbeing). More importantly, I am not describing much in the way of religion’s negative effects. I believe that the meaning framework can allow for and make sense of religion’s negative health and wellbeing consequences. Indeed, some implications of this work point to certain characteristics of religions that would be expected to produce or be associated with decreased wellbeing (such as religions that are more fundamentalist and literal). However, because I wanted to get a general sense of religion’s benefits for mental health, I approach this study by looking at how and why religion helps mental health, and the majority of this work will focus on what religion is doing when it’s working well for people. Therefore, although I reference ways in which religion may harm a sense of meaning in life, I do not spend much time describing or explaining the negative effects of religion. The reader will have to keep in mind the generally positive focus of this work, without forgetting the very real and important potential for negative effects.

Because of this positive bent, I feel it is tremendously important for me to be explicit about another thing I’m not doing: arguing that religion is always or inherently good, that religion’s benefits to an individual translate into benefits for a society, that we should all take up religion in order to be happy, or that we as humans in some sense “need” religion. I do not think that taking God out of the classroom has led the United States to a spiritual crisis. I do not
believe that we need religion to be happy. More importantly, I do not advocate for any kind of state imposition of religion. However impossible it is to divide church from state, the goal is a valorous one. I am a left-leaning, liberal atheist from upper-middle-class America—I was born to be a nonbeliever—and I do not diverge from my peers’ accurate and deeply important criticism of the many detrimental effects of religion and Christianity in particular.

I do, however, vehemently disagree with what my personal experiences have found to be a commonly-held belief among these peers of mine—that religion is inherently toxic, violent, delusional, or dangerous. Religion’s darker side—the detrimental effects of which have been felt throughout time and space—cannot and should not be discounted. However, this darker side of religion has had its story told time and again. It has become an easy and flippant response to religious tensions, especially those between science and religion, and a way for elitist academics to dismiss the experiences of others as delusional or backwards.

Perhaps there are those who advocate the contrary—that religion’s positive side has enjoyed too much of the limelight. Too many people will blindly believe that religion is as good as it purports itself to be, that Mother Theresa and Gandhi have undone all religious hate with their religious love, or that religious hate is antithetical to religion, and therefore not truly religious in nature. I believe both of these camps, those who deny any good in religion, and those who deny any harm, are obviously incorrect. Religion is an expression of human nature, and human nature is capable of both the greatest good and the darkest evil.

As such, I am explicitly advocating for a more nuanced understanding of religion. I am asking that we do not write off this complex phenomenon as a mass delusion, or as only ever toxic or violent in its effects. Asking that we do not stereotype religion in this way is not somehow
turning me into a religious apologist—it is more precisely asking for better and more scientific scholarship. As Lee Kirkpatrick (2005) describes,

the idea that religion is broadly “good” or “bad” is absurd on its face… It seems patently obvious from thousands of years of human history that religion can be a powerful force in promoting either peace or war, mental health or mental illness, prosocial or antisocial behavior, racism or universalism, happiness or misery. The role of science is to determine which of these is true under what conditions, and why and how it occurs. (p. 5)

Religion is too complex and too varied a phenomenon to be flattened into a single adjective. To do so misunderstands the concept itself and dangerously biases our work. The vast, vast majority of humanity is religious. They do not deserve to be discounted or condemned. A growing population of people—myself included—are not religious. We do not deserve to be discounted or condemned either. Good scholarship will not satisfy itself with easy stereotypes on either side.

Nietzsche and his madman spoke too soon—religion is holding on. But understanding how it continues to hold on, how it helps or doesn’t help individuals (or societies) in this increasingly complex religious landscape requires patient understanding. Just like the weather, religion does a lot of different things. We cannot understand the stormy dark sides of religion if we ignore the hope and sunshine it can bring.
Chapter One:

Meaning

Human beings are in a unique predicament, saddled as we are in animal bodies, with brains that somehow produce conscious experiences of the world around us. Like animals, we strive to survive. Unlike animals, we are aware that, despite all our efforts, we will one day lose this battle for survival. Some scholars argue that this uneasy juxtaposition is what has led humanity, for as long as we have records for, to question why we are here, what our purpose is, what our lives mean, and what happens to us after we die (Routledge, 2014). Religious scriptures and texts, philosophical works, and literature throughout history have often dealt with these questions. Greek myths explained how human lives were created and controlled by Fates who spin and cut the threads of our lives; Christianity teaches that those who live well will end up in Heaven after they die; Hindus believe that death is overcome in a constant cycle of rebirth, and that one’s actions in one life determine one’s status in the next. Such examples serve only to underscore the intuitively obvious: human beings have always and will always seek to make sense of and find meaning in their lives. Meaning matters.

For a long time, the meaning of life was an exclusively religious or philosophical question, and indeed, it largely still is. However, existential psychology and its more modern cousin, positive psychology, have brought such questions into the realm of the social sciences. Taken under the wing of psychology, questions about the meaning of life become questions about meaning in life. Without discounting the value of philosophical and theological
investigations into the meaning of life, scholars generally agree that an answer to this question is beyond the limits of science itself (e.g., Martela & Steger, 2016; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). Therefore, instead of investigating the answers to existential questions about life’s meaning, psychologists investigate the activity of questioning itself. Why does meaning in life seem to be an integral part of humanity? How do our experiences affect our sense of meaning in life? Where do we find the answers to these questions, and what are the consequences of doing so—or not doing so?

One of the most famous psychologists, if not the earliest, to take up these questions was Viktor Frankl, who, inspired by his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, argued that “man’s search for meaning is a primary force in his life” (Frankl, 1959/1972, p. 154). Around this idea, Frankl designed his particular form of therapy, logotherapy, which rests on the notion that “man’s main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain, but rather to see a meaning in his life. That is why a man is even ready to suffer, on the condition, to be sure, that his suffering has meaning” (Frankl, 1959/1972, p. 179). Thus, for Frankl, to have meaning in life meant to have a purpose for living, a purpose that made sense of one’s suffering and turned a traumatic, chaotic event into a purposeful one from which personal growth and meaning could be made.

In the decades since Frankl’s works, psychologists have continued to pursue the question of meaning in people’s lives, and while mainstream psychology was slow to take up these questions of meaning that had existed on the fringe of the field (Paloutzian & Park, 2005), theoretical and empirical inquiry into how meaning functions in people’s lives has exploded in recent years (Paloutzian & Park, 2013; Martela & Steger, 2016). Indeed, some have gone so far as to contend that, “meaning is a central topic in psychology, or perhaps even the central topic”
(Park, 2005, p. 295). However, the “meaning” psychologists investigate now extends beyond the existential kind of meaning that Frankl describes, to incorporate the multiple forms of meaning that pervade the human experience.

The Meaning of “Meaning”

The expansive use of the term “meaning,” and the pervasive ways in which meaning functions in people’s lives, from interpreting visual stimuli or words, to interpreting the meaning of one’s life, underscore the issues that arise in discussions of “meaning.” The concepts of “meaning” and “meaning in life” are complex and multifaceted, and this can be seen in the ambiguous and overlapping ways in which meaning has been defined throughout psychological literature. Though research on meaning in life has greatly expanded in recent years, and scholars tend to agree on the centrality, pervasiveness, and importance of meaning to people’s lives, the field still suffers from a great deal of “definitional ambiguity” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 531). This ambiguity stems from the term’s various uses, as meaning “spans the domains of purpose, intent, order, sense, interpretation, signification, and denotation” (Paloutzian & Park, 2005, p. 14), and the field’s lack of a standard, agreed-upon definition of “meaning” serves only to confuse and impede the progress scholars are trying to make.

In light of such issues, it is important to begin any discussion of “meaning” by tackling the definitional issue. The task of defining meaning is notoriously difficult. Roy F. Baumeister (1991) has argued that “meaning” is particularly difficult to define because “the very act of definition implies the use of meaning” (as cited in Park, 2005, p. 296). Regardless, scholars have variously defined meaning as “the cognitive significance of sensory and perceptual stimulation and information to us” (Spilka et al., 2003, as cited in Park, 2005, p. 296), as “shared mental
representations of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships” (Baumeister, 1991, p. 16, as cited in Park, 2005, p. 296), or as “feeling that one has purpose or direction, as in having plans and intentions” (Klinger, 1977, as cited in Park, 2005, p. 298). Frank Martela and Michael F. Steger (2016) argue that the etymological origin of “meaning,” which lie in the Old German word “meinen”, or, “to have in mind,” already reveals that meaning is tied up with the unique capacity of human mind for reflective, linguistic thinking. Meaning is based in our mind’s capacity to form mental representations about the world and develop connections between these representations… When we ask what something means, we are trying to locate that something within our web of mental representations. Meaning is about mentally connecting things. This is true whether we ask about the meaning of a thing or the meaning of our life (p. 537).

In this way, and as implicitly alluded to above, meaning may be seen as not merely a kind of description, but as a tool, as a method of engaging with the world. As Baumeister (1991) contends, “meaning is a tool for adaptation, for controlling the world, for self-regulation, and for belongingness. Indeed, it is the best all-purpose tool on the planet” (p. 357–358, as cited in Park, 2005, p. 296). Meaning, then, is about “looking at life through mental representations that can be created, selected, combined, and interchanged” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 538). It is about not just experiencing the world, but about connecting experiences to something larger, and interpreting the experiences in light of it.

Meaning Systems and Religion

Because of the pervasive and integral role that meaning plays in our lives, the concept can serve an important function as a common language to talk about religion, mental health, and wellbeing. To show how, I begin with a discussion of the theory of religion used here.
Current Issues in Psychology of Religion

The field of the psychology of religion is a relatively new one. Although, as described in the introduction, interest in this area appears to be on the rise, and hundreds upon hundreds of research studies are investigating how religion relates to individual’s thoughts, actions, and feelings, the field is devoid of any comprehensive, guiding theory. Lee Kirkpatrick (2005), in the introduction to his work on attachment theory and religion, laments that we do not yet have a “scientific, comprehensive, explanatory psychology of religion—this much seems beyond debate” (p. 2). Furthermore, he worries that “the field is not currently on a path that will lead us to one. Instead, the field is meandering aimlessly with no clear direction” (p. 2). This is the same issue noted by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park (2005) in their Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality:

One of the perennial concerns of scholars grappling with how best to conceptualize the psychological processes that mediate religiousness, and seeking the best concepts and categories with which to present, talk about, and integrate the various strands of research, has been the cry for theory. Scholars have repeatedly pointed out that the psychology of religion is long on data and short on theory (Dittes, 1969). In fact, in the past… there was not even a good conceptual model that could be used as a working tool to help researchers think, integrate material, and develop new and better hypotheses. (p. 4-5)

The lack of such an integrative method means that, while researchers spend time and resources churning out quantitative and qualitative data on psychological dimensions of religion, the field as a whole cannot adequately make sense of this data—it lacks a common framework in which to place it.

Part of the problem is that the psychology of religion, though situated nominally in psychology, pulls together work from a vast number of disciplines. Neuroscientists, cognitive scientists, philosophers, anthropologists, and psychologists all discuss and contribute valuable information to the field. A framework for the field, then, will have to integrate the findings from
a range of disciplines—it must be interdisciplinary. Similarly, it must be flexible enough to incorporate work done at various levels of abstraction—from the neural level to the sociocultural level (Paloutzian & Park, 2005).

_A Possible Antidote: Meaning Systems_

Ray Paloutzian and Crystal Park (2005, 2013) offer the theory of meaning systems to potentially fill this void in the field. In the introduction to the first edition of their handbook, Paloutzian and Park (2005) note that, for the field of psychology of religion to mature and integrate the many disparate methodologies and levels of abstraction at which scholars in the field work, the field requires, among other things, “a common language that can be applied across the specialized topics in the field, [and] an overarching framework that is powerful and flexible enough to contain a variety of midlevel theories about religious phenomena and that connects psychology of religion theory to the rest of the life sciences more generally” (p. 13). They then argue that these needs can be met by “construing religion as a meaning system… [and] using an evolutionary approach to the psychology of religion” (p. 13).

Both of these components—meaning systems and an evolutionary approach—are important and valuable tools to understand and research religion. In recent years, evolutionary theories of religion’s origins have gained ground. Many current cognitive theories of religion describe how religious phenomena, experiences, and beliefs may have arisen from normal cognitive functions of the human brain, and how religion itself may be an evolutionary adaptation or the spurious by-product of one. These theories of religion’s origins and of the cognitive basis of religious beliefs and experiences, are exciting and fascinating new ways to conceive of religion. However, since the arguments in this work do not depend on the acceptance
of this theory (though they can be understood as in agreement with it), a thorough explanation of these theories is outside the purview of this work. To learn more about these exciting ideas, I recommend the work of Ara Norenzayan (2013), Pascal Boyer (2001), and Lee Kirkpatrick (2005), among others. For the purposes of this work, however, no more will be said about the evolutionary aspect of psychology of religion’s future.

Instead, I turn to the second part of Paloutzian and Park’s recommendations for a psychology of religion paradigm: construing religion as a meaning system [MS]. The authors argue that, within the psychology of religion, the ideas scholars are working with can all “be fruitfully discussed as an expression of the question of meaning” and that “meaning holds much promise as a unifying construct in psychology” (p. 13). This may be especially true within the psychology of religion, as the authors note, “all religion concerns meaning in one sense or another” (p. 14). Indeed, if meaning is understood to be about “connecting things” as Roy F. Baumeister (1991, as cited in Paloutzian & Park, 2005) notes, it may only be fitting to use meaning as a framework for religion, because “that which connects is the literal meaning of the term ‘religion’” (Paloutzian & Park, 2005, p. 14). In this sense, then, meaning and religion may already be intimately related to one another.

Meaning Systems: An Introduction

Of course, to understand what the authors mean when they advocate for a meaning systems view of religion, we must first understand what scholars mean by “meaning systems.” If meaning is about connecting, reflecting, and interpreting, meaning systems are the totality of beliefs, goals, and values by which stimuli and events are interpreted—meaning systems produce meanings. They can thus be understood as the beliefs, assumptions, and goals against which
observations or experiences are interpreted, and from which actions and goals are taken or sought. Or, as Paloutzian and Park (2013) define them, “at the biological and psychological levels, meaning systems are thus broad frameworks through which people attend to and perceive stimuli; organize their behavior; conceptualize themselves, others, and interpersonal relationships; remember their past; and anticipate their future” (p. 12).

Meaning systems are integral to the way humans move through and interact with the world around them. On Michael F. Steger’s (2009) description, the central challenge facing human beings is “adaptively identifying, interpreting, and engaging with the most important features of one’s environment. Among the many sights, sounds, aromas, and tactile stimuli one experiences, only some will be useful or important” (p. 679). It is up to the human brain to decide which stimuli are worth paying attention to and what should be done in response to them. That is, the brain perceives an array of stimuli, which must be organized such that the mind can make sense of what its seeing, and then interpreted to decipher what actions should be taken in response to the stimuli.

The information is processed in terms of beliefs the person already holds. If your brain recognizes a tiger lurking in the woods, ready to jump out and attack, this observation is worthless without the accompanying beliefs that tigers are dangerous and that danger needs to be avoided. Only with such understandings does the observation of a tiger mean that one’s life is in danger. This kind of interpretation goes beyond such engrained instincts, however. A tiger might mean danger if one finds oneself alone in the woods, but a tiger in a zoo more likely means something interesting, exciting, or cute. In this way, meaning and meaning systems are neither static, nor universal. As Steger (2009) describes, “the same stimuli can be viewed in completely opposite ways by two different people… The stimulus is the same, but the interpretation varies
greatly because its meaning differs from person to person” (p. 679). If someone is allergic to or afraid of dogs, they are likely to interpret a dog running towards them differently than someone who is a dog lover. What interpretation one takes depends on prior beliefs and experiences; it depends on the meaning system individuals use to understand and interpret the world around them.

As this further notion demonstrates, meaning systems function at various levels of abstraction, from the more micro (neurological) level to the macro (sociocultural) level. Indeed, Paloutzian and Park (2013) note that

“the notion of meaning systems applies to psychological processes inherent in cognitive mechanisms and appraisal processes as discussed by clinical and social psychologists, but also to psychological processes at more macro and micro levels of analysis. Anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural psychologists have used the concept of MS [meaning systems] with the particulars pitched at their level of analysis” (p. 11).

In this way, the micro level constructs meaning from visual stimuli (as when the brain organizes a wealth of visual information into a comprehensible visual field, populated with objects we can recognize as chairs, desks, and cats), whereas the more macro level makes sense of what, say, social or geopolitical events mean (as when we opine about what Trump’s election means for us, for the country, or for the world). The micro level meaning is often the subject of cognitive science inquiries, and is shared by other animals and organisms—many animals besides humans know what the perception of a tiger means, although they may not know what it meant if they saw one in a zoo.

For people, however, meaning exists and is fundamental to human life across many different levels of abstraction. What a predator running towards you means, and what one should do in response to it, are fairly obvious and instinctual, but how does one interpret and act upon a road sign, a strong emotion, an interaction between friends, or their own lives? We find meaning
in tigers jumping out of bushes, but we also find meaning in our relationships with others and in our lives as a whole. Steger (2009) describes this well:

As a species, we have developed profound abilities to harvest meaning from the world around us. Given human facility with and immersion in meaning, we should expect that just as people struggle to understand the meanings of natural disasters, medical diagnoses, works of art, or their marriages, they also strive to understand the meaning of their own lives. Meaning in this sense enables people to interpret and organize their experience, achieve a sense of their own worth and place, identify the things that matter to them, and effectively direct their energies. The term meaning in life has been used to describe the construct underlying all of these dimensions, and at its heart, meaning in life refers to people’s beliefs that their lives are significant and that they transcend the ephemeral present (p. 680).

On this conception, it is clear that meaning plays an essential role in everything from simple perception, to behavioral guidance, to existential questions.

Thus, scholars propose that the meaning systems of the human mind exist to interpret and analyze information with which to inform one’s actions, decisions, and desires. In this way, humans are fundamentally meaning-makers.6 Paloutzian and Park (2015) argue that

humans are inherently constituted such that they need to make meaning (e.g., continuity, pattern, relationship, connection, implication) out of ambiguity. Doing so may involve consciousness, but often it does not… The MS as a whole comprises all of these elements [such as attitudes and beliefs, values, goals and behaviors, overall priorities, identity and self-definition, and worldview] and the processes by which they interact in order to appraise, evaluate, and respond to new information relative to already present meaning(s)… Thus, the MS construct is a model of how the mind processes, accepts or rejects, modifies, or responds to the constant flow of new information. (p. 171-172)

Therefore, although the term “meaning systems” can in some sense be seen as analogous to terms such as “belief system” or “worldview,” it more accurately extends beyond these, to include the totality of meanings we make as we move through our daily lives. Although we may

6 Indeed, as Ray F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park (2013) describe in the opening chapter of their Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, “the notion that humans are of necessity meaning makers is widely accepted in psychology and many other disciplines” (p. 11).
talk about meaning systems as a whole, it would be impossible to actually sum up an individual’s meaning system and compare the totality of “meanings” at once.

Individuals make sense of their lives by drawing on their own experiences and cultural influences, and thus carry around with them an apparatus of meanings that are unique to the individual. Meaning systems are thus not something that someone either does or does not have; they are universal. Insofar as we are conscious, we are making sense of our world in terms of a constellation of implicit and explicit, conscious and non-conscious beliefs, goals, values, biases, and emotions. Even if we cannot make sense of these things, it is not because we lack a meaning system, but because the meaning system we have breaks down. Seeing Bigfoot in the woods would likely trigger a process of trying to make meaning out of the occurrence (was it just a big dog, or maybe someone playing a trick?). An inability to explain this event may demonstrate a problem with an individual’s meaning system, an instance in which it ceases to function optimally, but it does not lead one to conclude that they lack a meaning system.

Religious Meaning Systems

If meaning systems, as described above, are the basis of Paloutzian and Park’s (2005, 2013, 2015) theory for the psychology of religion, how do meaning systems actually relate to religion? What does it mean to describe someone as having a religious meaning system? Generally speaking, a religious meaning system would be one in which an individual’s meaning system is, to some substantial extent, informed by the beliefs, goals, and values that a religious tradition or traditions claim to be valid or sacred. To differentiate between doctrinal systems of belief and an individual’s actual meaning system, I will reserve the term “belief system” to reference the beliefs advocated by a particular religious tradition. These belief systems may or
may not make up a substantial part of an individual’s meaning system. To the extent that they do, that individual could be described as having a religious meaning system.

This may seem to be an unsatisfying or unilluminating description of religious meaning systems. The issue, I believe, surrounds the notion of religion. The difficulty of defining religion is a perennial issue in religious studies and related disciplines, and is particularly tricky in the context of psychology. This is because, as James Murphy (2017) and other scholars (e.g. Guthrie, 1996; Taves, 2009, 2013, as cited in Murphy, 2017) have argued, “religion is not a singular thing, but is instead an often misleading reification of similar yet not identical ideas in the minds of different individuals” (p. 7). Even such broad definitions as “the search for the sacred” (e.g., Pargament, 1997), break down insofar as almost anything can be considered sacred (Paloutzian & Park, 2013). Therefore, Paloutzian and Park (2013) argue that “the term religious as an adjective modifying MS has no agreed-upon definition but instead designates a conceptually unstable subset of MSs that researchers operationalize in a number of different ways depending on the nature of their research” (p. 7). Indeed, the practice of not defining religion in scholarly works on the matter is actually an increasingly common choice. Kirkpatrick (2005), for example, insists in his introduction that he will not define religion at all; “This is not because I do not know how to define it (although it is true that I do not), nor because I am hiding some kind of special, unusual definition of religion to spring on you later. I assure you that I generally mean by ‘religion’ pretty much what most people mean by the term, but I refuse to attempt to define it” (p. 15).

Not only is it difficult to provide a definition of religion, but, as Paloutzian and Park (2015) describe, determining a single, universal definition of religion, especially in the context of
psychology, is not only impossible, but likely misguided. As the authors describe, common
definitions of religion are ineffective for the purposes of the psychology of religion because
they are second-order definitions invented by scholars in the abstract, whereas our
concern is to understand religiousness and spirituality in the same way that we wish to
understand all human behavior, which is in first-order terms at the level of actual
humans behaving in ordinary life… we are trying to understand the basic processes by
which all people believe and behave, rather than trying, a priori, to define what
“religion” or any other abstraction “truly” is. (p. 169).

How an individual defines religion for themselves, the authors contend, is a piece of raw data. If
someone says that they are “spiritual but not religious,” those words are

an instance of human behavior in vivo—and psychology has as its goal to understand
both what they mean and the processes through which they occur. This means that if we
begin by dismissing the statement and saying that the term “spirituality” is not relevant
to our topic of study (because we study “religion”) when real people actually use the
concept, then we can never understand their behavior – because we begin by disallowing
use of a concept that people actually use and which is not always a “mere” substitute for
the word that we prefer. Our overall understanding hinges on knowing what the terms
people use mean to them, not what they mean a priori to us or based on theological or
philosophical reflections. (Paloutzian & Park, 2015, p. 171)

Indeed, this example from the authors underscores a growing issue in studying religion. As
described in the introduction, an increasing number of people are describing themselves as
“spiritual,” rather than “religious.” Should they not be included in psychology of religion simply
because they do not use the word “religion” to describe themselves? This is obviously
problematic, since a number of these people still believe in notions historically labeled as
“religious,” such as the existence of God or gods, or life after death. Defining religion in
opposition to spirituality, then, or in some a priori way, arbitrarily dissects the population of
people and behaviors that are precisely of interest within the psychology of religion.

Especially with regard to spirituality versus religion, parsing these two constructs and
providing a useful definition of each creates headaches for researchers. There simply isn’t a
common understanding about where religion ends and spirituality begins, or about whether they
are separate notions at all. Murphy (2017) cites a number of studies that attempted to untangle the concepts of spirituality and religion, using a range of methodologies. What their findings show, is that “although the terms may carry different nuances for particular people these distinctions are emic and have little analytical validity. Each concept is so broad, and the two frequently overlap so significantly, that they should be considered a single category” (p. 9). I’m inclined to agree.

After all, how can we compare one person who, say, identifies as religious, but doesn’t attend church and only infrequently reads scripture, with another person who calls themselves spiritual but not religious, and nevertheless does attend church and read scripture? Surely, such cases exist—spiritual people may not agree with the totality of Christian doctrine, but still enjoy the community of church and wisdom of scripture. Especially because of the lack of any agreed-upon definition of “spiritual” and “religious,” categorizing one person as spiritual and another as religious appears to rest on nothing more than their own self-identification. Indeed, the choice to label oneself as “spiritual” in opposition to “religious” often stems from a cultural, personal, or political aversion to certain forms of “religion.” Whether or not someone self-identifies as one or the other may be an interesting and informative piece of data to explore. I fear, however, that the reasons for doing so, and the meaning attributed to “spiritual” or “religious,” will be far too idiosyncratic and culture/context-dependent to be able to extrapolate from one person’s identity to another’s. Therefore, in line with Kirkpatrick, Paloutzian and Park, and Murphy, I will not provide a more substantive definition of religion, or of spirituality in opposition to religion, but will nevertheless use religion as an adjective to describe certain kinds of meaning systems.

So, when is a meaning system religious, and when is it not? The line is difficult to draw. As Murphy (2017) notes, “there are fundamental similarities, at least in terms of psychological
and sociological function, between “religious” and “secular” worldviews… religiosity and
secularity [should be viewed] not as a dichotomous choice but rather as part of a broad, complex
spectrum” (p. 7, 11). The subtractive view of secularity—as being the absence of religion—is
flawed because secularists or atheists “do not simply ‘believe in nothing’ but instead actually
believe in different things which appear to serve some of the functions that religious beliefs do
for others” such as purpose or emotional regulation (Murphy, 2017, p. 12). An atheist does not
believe that God created the world some 6,000 or so years ago, but they do (for example) believe
that the beginnings of our world can be traced back to the Big Bang, that people evolved from
animals, and that black holes exist somewhere in the galaxy. They have different beliefs from
religious people, and the moniker of “atheist” denotes in particular their difference with respect
to their beliefs about the existence of God, but these differences are not dichotomous or inherent.
Indeed, many religious people believe both in the existence of God, and in the reality of the Big
Bang. The choice to label oneself religious or non-religious is largely personal and political, and
not necessarily inherent by way of one’s beliefs.

So, where does this leave religious meaning systems? Religious meaning systems can, in
contrast to secular or non-religious meaning systems, generally be described as those that are
closer in beliefs, goals, and values to belief systems historically labeled “religion” or labeled
“religion” by the individual. For the purposes of this work, and due to the reliance on
psychological studies, religious meaning systems are those belonging to individuals who are
labeled religious in such studies—again, this mostly includes individuals who ascribe to the
major world religions, and/or are living in WEIRD populations. People with more religious
meaning systems will more often answer that they believe in God, that they go to church, temple,
or synagogue, or that they pray, but no single number of these historically “religious” practices
constitute necessary and sufficient conditions to label a meaning system “religious.” The notion of meaning systems allows for us to talk about a range of religious beliefs without defining a particular set of beliefs as religious and others as secular. Meaning systems will function as meaning systems do, taking in beliefs and interpretations from a range of personal and cultural experiences. Some of these will align with religious belief systems and religious traditions, others less so, but the fluidity and generality of meaning systems makes space for “religion,” “spirituality,” and “secularity” to exist not as a distinct, all-or-nothing categories, but descriptions of a range of meanings.

A Meaning Systems Theory of Religion: Conclusion

Exquisite paradigmatic theories, especially of phenomena as complex and multifaceted as religion, do not emerge pristine from the brain of a brilliant scholar. It will take time, trial and error, discussion and debate, and much revision for any psychological theory of religion to grow into a mature, useful, and generally accepted paradigm. In this sense, the meaning systems theory may not be perfect, but it nevertheless provides us with a useful and much-needed starting point. It is my opinion that this starting point is a very good one, as it enables us to conceive of a continuum between “religiosity” and “secularity,” is general enough to incorporate meaning at various levels of abstraction (because the meaning system exists across these levels), therefore incorporating work from various disciplines, and recognizes the importance of meaning in people’s lives.

It has also shown promise thus far. Although I cannot pretend to be an expert on the field’s totality of opinions, the concept has been taken up and advocated for by others in the field (e.g. Silberman, 2005; Murphy, 2017; and other authors in Paloutzian and Park’s 2005 and 2013
handbooks). I use this conception of religion because of its potential, its generally promising reception, and simply because work done in the psychology of religion is in desperate need of a common framework; even if this one isn’t perfect, we need a place to start.

Meaning Systems and Mental Health

The framework of meaning systems is useful not only to integrate my work within the broader field of the psychology of religion, but also because it can offer a compelling view of mental health and wellbeing. There are three main reasons that I use meaning systems to talk about mental health and wellbeing: it lays a common framework with that of religion, it does justice to the subjective experience of wellbeing and mental health, and it allows for me to talk about mental health and wellbeing in terms of meaning in life.

First, talking about mental health in terms of meaning systems simply allows for a common language between the realms of religion and mental health—if both of these constructs can be discussed about in terms of people’s meaning systems, then we can better understand the relationship between religion and mental health, and the nuances thereof.

Secondly, a meaning systems view of mental health and wellbeing gives weight to what is, in my view, an important and frequently neglected component of mental health—again, meaning. By this, I mean that we should talk about mental health in terms of meaning systems because meaning systems produce and describe the subjective experiences of people, and this subjective understanding of mental health is increasingly removed from mental health discussions in the age of the purportedly objective biomedical view of mental illness.
In his book *Meaning Systems and Mental Health Culture*, James T. Hansen (2016) argues that meaning systems are an invaluable component of understanding mental illness: “because they are an omnipresent shaping force of life, meaning systems should arguably be a primary consideration when attempting to alleviate psychological suffering” (p. xvi). This is why, Hansen describes, careful and attentive non-judgmental listening is often an important part of traditional counseling and psychotherapy; it is “the surest route to understanding the meanings that give life to psychological suffering” (p. xvi). However, his work argues that “the prominent ideologies of contemporary mental health culture are arguably all aimed at the obliteration of meaning” (p. xvi). For example, the diagnostic guidelines for psychiatric disorders (e.g., the DSM), the chemical imbalance hypothesis (that, for example, depression is the result of certain chemicals in the brain being out of balance), and the rise of brain-based reductive theories of mental illness, all “obliterate meaning systems… Neuroscience has no room for the nuances of subjectivity; it is ideologically steered by the flashing lights of magnetic resonance imaging machines, not the personal meanings that brightly illuminate the course of our lives” (p. xvii).

Although he notes that certain advances, such as medications, have resulted from ideologies that “strip away the deeply personal factors involved in psychological suffering” (p. xvii), he contends that objectifying ideologies are nevertheless problematic: “objectifying orientations presume that problems are the result of a deviation or deficiency; suffering is a sign that something has deviated from normal functioning and needs to be corrected (e.g., broken leg, cognitive distortion)” (p. 152). An orientation that appreciates meaning systems, by contrast,

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7 Hansen’s work has no direct connection to the work of Paloutzian and Park (2005, 2013, 2015) and their conception of meaning systems. The notion of meaning systems is not unique to Paloutzian and Park, but the use of meaning systems to talk about religion appears to be unique to them, and the meaning systems theory they use appears to date back to Park & Folkman (1997). Nevertheless “meaning systems” as Hansen uses the term appears analogous to Paloutzian and Park’s.
“presumes that a person’s psychological suffering is, at some level, a reasonable response to the way she or he makes sense of the world; the person is potentially understandable, not broken” (p. 152).

Hansen’s (2016) work speaks to what I believe is a growing issue with mental healthcare in the United States. In my own experience, the healthcare system’s focus on medication over cognitive or behavioral therapies and practices leads to false promises of just how much an individual can benefit from medications, and downplays the importance of alternative therapies. As shown in the introduction, medications, at least for now, are not the magic bullet we want them to be, and they come with a slew of difficult side effects that can cause more problems than they solve. While I do not wish to downplay the importance of medications, nor argue that we should not be prescribing them, I do, personally, find that the emphasis on medications ignores and invalidates the importance of other mental health treatment.

Adopting a meaning system lens for mental health is not intended to discount the large role that biology and genetics appears to play in mental illness. Rather, it is intended to shine a light on the ways in which a person’s meaning system is (or should be) implicated in their experience of (and treatment for) mental health issues. Biology plays a role in mental health, but so do beliefs about self and others, about the world, and about the future. As Hansen (2016) notes, “cognitive theorists, for example, presume that irrational or maladaptive patterns of thinking are the cause of psychopathology (Mahoney, 1991). People, without knowing it, act upon certain core beliefs that result in their suffering” (p. xxv). Although I lack the qualifications to truly argue that we adopt of more meaning-centered view of mental illness, and it is beyond the scope of this work to do so, the importance of meaning and subjectivity in mental health is
nevertheless an important, though not primary or fundamental, reason for focusing on mental health and wellbeing in terms of meaning in this work.

Finally, the third and most primary reason that I use a meaning framework to talk about mental health and wellbeing is that I have chosen to focus on mental health and wellbeing in terms of meaning in life. Though it may seem as though meaning systems and meaning in life are somewhat distinct from each other, the meaning system framework allows us to talk about how meaning in life is generated. Whether or not someone feels that they have a sense of meaning in life will depend on meanings made by their meaning system. A belief that life has an inherent purpose, for example, is a product of a person’s meaning system. Meaning systems, as the totality of our beliefs, goals, and values, are what generate, or fail to generate, a sense of meaning in life.

Meaning in Life

A Needed Framework

As described in the introduction, scholars offer a myriad of factors that they argue mediate the relationship between religion and wellbeing: some argue that religion’s benefits come from its ability to instill a sense of certainty in one’s beliefs, which is in turn related to higher wellbeing (e.g. Galen & Kloet, 2011); others argue that the benefits are due to religion’s provision of a socially supportive community (e.g. Lim & Putnam, 2010); still others contend that it is religion’s function as an “existential resource” that explains the connection (e.g. Van Uden & Zondag, 2016). However, it seems apparent to me that the wealth and breadth of studies that link religiosity with increased wellbeing cannot be entirely explained in terms of one factor
or another; it is more likely that a host of these factors function together to produce the general trend that we see. It would be difficult to argue that the benefits one individual gets are only from religion’s provision of a supportive community, as opposed to its function as an existential resource, and what benefits one individual may not benefit another.

Of course, I do not necessarily contend that these scholars truly believe that their factor, and not another one, is solely or always responsible for the connections between religion and wellbeing. Nevertheless, in my reading of the literature, I saw no one who explicitly noted this. Moreover, no one noted how the different factors might relate to one another—how certainty of belief might actually be intertwined with a socially supportive community, for example. If we want to understand why religion is associated with wellbeing and mental health as broadly as it is, we should not satisfy ourselves with the discovery of one single factor. What we need instead is a way to talk about the many different possible factors, how they relate to one another, and how they relate to the particularities of certain religious meaning systems.

Perhaps more importantly, we need a way to talk about the other studies—the ones that don’t find a connection between religiosity and wellbeing, or do but find that they are negatively correlated. Even though these make up the minority of the studies, the consistent data that shows religion doesn’t always lead to wellbeing deserve explanation as well. What is going on when religion doesn’t help mental health in any significant way or actually worsens it? Although this work does not focus on these studies, it is hoped that this framework holds potential to explain them as well.

This is because the framework that I propose accounts for the relationship between and among the many possible factors. Maybe the instances in which religion is not associated with wellbeing are those in which one factor, such as a socially supportive community, is present but
another, say, certainty of belief, is not. Feeling accepted by a religious community is likely impacted by being uncertain of whether or not one believes in the religious teachings of that community, in that religious doubts may ostracize someone from the group. If this were the case for one individual, and their religiosity appeared to lead to lower wellbeing even though they went to church all the time, would we conclude that religious communities don’t boost wellbeing? Or that, for mental health, being certain is more important than belonging to a community? The conclusions depend so much on the particularities of the situation. There are some religious communities that embrace doubt, and are accepting of diverse beliefs, while other communities may implicitly or explicitly ostracize individuals for their religious doubts. The point is that these factors likely interact, in complex and unique ways for each person, and therefore any theory of why religion boosts wellbeing should not only make space to talk about the multiple pathways between the two, but to understand how one path influences another, which in turn influence the overall wellbeing of a person.

Meaning in Life

In my own search for an answer to my original question of whether and how religion boosts mental health and wellbeing, I was not satisfied with the practice of focusing on only one factor at the expense of others. Moreover, I found that there was no common framework to talk about the many different possible factors or how they relate to one another. The lack of this, I believe, makes it difficult for us to really understand how religion relates to wellbeing or to integrate the wealth of data the demonstrates this relationship through various methodologies and measures. It is my hope that the concept meaning in life might serve the purpose of an integrative framework of religion and mental health. In doing so, I am taking one tiny step towards a
framework; offering one possibility, and testing it out. It is almost definitely not perfect, and I do not argue that it is. I only argue that it might work as a first step and seek to explore this possibility. This work is therefore just a sketch, an outline of a possibility. It has not been rigorously tested and does not actually discuss all the possible mediating factors—but it does integrate a number of them. Meaning in life, I argue, is a comprehensive enough theory to give voice to the many different factors, while also serving to make sense of the relationships between them. It also allows us to observe the ways in which religion is uniquely adept at conferring and maintaining a sense of meaning in life, potentially allowing us to appropriate some of these abilities for the growing non-religious population or at least better understand why religion seems to be better at instilling meaning in life than non-religious meaning systems.

Of course, I am far from the first person to attribute religion’s benefits to its ability to instill a sense of meaning in life. This is commonly cited as a possible mediating factor (e.g. Steger & Frazier, 2005, Koenig, King, and Carson, 2012), and for good reason. Meaning in life is generally understood to be a fundamental component of a happy and healthy life (for example, Martela & Steger, 2016; Shiah, Chang, Chiang, Lin, & Tam, 2015; Galek, Flannelly, Ellison, Silton, & Jankowski, 2015). Michael F. Steger (2012a) cites a number of studies showing that meaning in life is positively and significantly related to: positive affect and emotions, including high morale, love, joy, and vitality; positive personality traits such as extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience; self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-actualization, and positive self-regard; psychological adjustment; and general well-being. Moreover, empirical studies also frequently (though not always) find a positive relation between various measures of religiosity and meaning in life (e.g. Steger, 2012a, Park, 2005). However, and as Park (2005) notes, these studies often use a simple measure of meaning in life and do not elaborate on what
this vague concept actually represents. Therefore, the connection often cited between religion and meaning in life is not elaborated upon, and is never explored in terms of its potential to serve as a unifying framework for the many way religion boosts wellbeing. To understand how religion leads to a sense of meaning in life, and to use it as a larger framework, then, we need a more in depth conception of what meaning in life really means.

Three Dimensions of Meaning in Life: Coherence, Purpose, and Significance

Much like meaning itself, meaning in life is a complex, multifaceted, and diverse concept. Does meaning in life refer to having a purpose? To feeling as though one’s life matters (Martela & Steger, 2016)? Or to the feeling that “life itself makes sense” (Heintzelman & King, 2014, as cited in Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 533)? There have been many different operationalizes of “meaning in life” that scholars have used, but this diversity serves to underscore the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept. It is not that meaning as purpose is thought to be more or less correct than meaning as feelings of significance, rather, these different aspects are all part of the complicated and interconnected ideas of “meaning in life.” In order to better describe and operationalize this complex concept, many authors break “meaning in life” down into more discrete aspects.

Most often, these multidimensional definitions divide the broader term into its comprehensive dimension, meaning, and its active dimension, purpose. However, these terms themselves are often left without further elaboration, are used interchangeably from one scholar to another, or at times understood as equivalent and at other times seen as fundamentally separate (Steger, 2012b; Martela & Steger, 2016).
In their overview of research on meaning, Martela and Stegar (2016) build upon other work (e.g., King et al., 2006; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Reker & Wong, 2012) that has delineated three aspects of meaning and make the case for just such a “trichotomy of meaning” (p. 532). As they describe, the earliest conception of this trichotomy was designed to map meaning onto the classic three-dimensional model of human behavior, which saw behavior as having cognitive, motivational, and affective components. The trichotomy of meaning approach, then, describes meaning as having a cognitive component, what Martela and Steger call “coherence,” a motivational component, dubbed “purpose,” and an affective component, “significance.” In advocating just such a model, they argue that the “three facets are tapping into different basic dimensions of human experience, and future research would benefit from treating these facets of meaning as separate… the three facets have different psychological roots and fulfill different functions in human life. It can also be argued that their presence or absence is caused by different factors” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 532).

On their conception, coherence refers to “people making sense of the world, rendering it comprehensible” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 533). As the cognitive component, coherence focuses on the sense that life is orderly and that there are identifiable patterns that unfold. It is descriptive, value-neutral, and, in some ways, serves as the cornerstone of meaning (Martela & Steger, 2016). It is the cognitive basis that begins at “the discrete level of moment-to-moment experiences,” from which “ever more elaborate models of patterns and predictability can be constructed, eventually building to overarching meaning models that help people make sense of one’s self, the world, and one’s fit within the world” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 534). In this way, coherence “organizes and prioritizes the most pertinent information about the myriad objects, facets, and domains of life into a coherent whole,” thus providing a “unifying framework
for conceptualizing how people understand both themselves and their worlds, as well as how they view the interplay between themselves and the world” (Steger, 2009, p. 681). A lack of coherence would be a sense that the world is unpredictable, chaotic, or lacking structure.

In contrast to coherence, purpose and significance are evaluative and normative (Martela & Steger, 2016). Purpose makes up the motivational aspect of meaning and is the sense that one’s life has goals, that one exists for a reason. When construed as distinct from “meaning,” purpose has been defined as a “central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning” (Mcknight & Kashdan, 2009, as cited in Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 534). Purpose is distinctly future-oriented, but is also understood to “lend significance to one’s present actions” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 534). In this way, having purpose in life is seen as leading to feelings of significance, but is nevertheless separate from these feelings.

Significance is the third component of meaning, and “focuses on value, worth, and importance” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 535). In a sense, significance is about what makes life worth living, and what makes our lives valuable. The authors define it as “a value-laden evaluation of one’s life as a whole regarding how important, worthwhile, and inherently valuable it feels” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 535). This aspect of meaning may be measured through an individual’s agreement or disagreement with such statements as “I feel that my life has value” and touches on a kind of sacrality about the world or about life itself. If purpose is motivational and future-oriented, significance encompasses evaluative notions of the past, present, and future.

Martela and Steger argue that the three facets of meaning be seen as distinct and separate, though not entirely independent. In some sense, they could be seen as building on one another, with coherence providing understandable information, purpose encompassing motivations taken
or hoped to be taken in response to such information, and significance arising from the presence of these and other factors. However, this kind of linear progression is not always nor only the case. The relations between the three components are intricate, and it is likely that the ways in which any or all of these components interact within an individual’s life are as varied, changing, and unique as the individuals themselves. Having two does not necessarily produce the third, and having all three does not necessarily mean that they are all explicitly tied together. Perhaps one finds coherence in scientific understandings of the world, purpose in their love of music, and significance through relationships with their family. In another case, one can easily imagine an individual who attains all three through religious beliefs and scriptures. At the same time, there are likely plenty of people who believe in scientific understandings of the world, but find no purpose or significance in it.

Thus, the three components could be understood as separable to a degree, and in certain instances, but more often, the three components feed back and forth with one another. For example, Ray F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park (2013), who endorse a similar tripartite model, note that it is hard to imagine having purpose without having a meaningful comprehension of the world. As in their example, the purpose of caring for a sick loved one usually involves making sense of the illness, past experiences with the loved one, or one’s own ability to perform certain tasks. Similarly, finding purpose in life through volunteering or charity likely involves making sense of what impact such volunteering has, or what deficits it seeks to fill. In this way, Martela and Steger (2016) offer that “coherence creates the field from which people draw their purposes” (p. 539). Importantly, however, the path from coherence to purpose can go both ways, as the authors describe: “Finding a clear purpose can provide predictable structure to one’s life.
Purpose helps to decide what are the things that should be done and things that should not be done, things to pay attention to, and things to ignore” (p. 539).

In a similar vein, the relationship between coherence and significance is intricate, often interdependent, yet simultaneously separable. In some ways, it seems that coherence would be a prerequisite for significance, because, after all, valuing oneself and one’s life would seem to depend on an understanding of one’s life. If one cannot find structure in or make sense of one’s life, it is difficult to imagine that they could identify aspects of their lives that give them meaning or value. At the same time, however, it is possible to experience coherence without significance. As an example, Martela and Steger offer the suicide of the Finnish music critic and journalist Seppo Heikinheimo. Though he wrote an autobiography which made clear that he was able to make sense of life and did not find it chaotic or lacking structure, he was unable to find significance in it. In this way, as Martela and Steger describe, “coherence thus might be a necessary condition for significance, but it is not a sufficient condition. Not understanding one’s life might make it valueless, but merely having a coherent life doesn’t automatically make it worth living” (p. 539).

Finally, purpose and significance are commonly understood to have an interdependent relationship. It is a sadly common experience of recently retired individuals, at least in Western countries, to feel a loss of value and significance in their lives because their sense of purpose had been tied to their work. Without goals and future-oriented aims that structure and organize one’s life, it can be more difficult to feel that life is meaningful. Therefore, it is common for retirees to engage in volunteer work or take up meaningful hobbies—both activities that can provide more purpose in their lives and lead to a more positive evaluation of life. On the other hand, feeling that one’s life is valuable may engender motivations to pursue goals and purpose. As Martela and
Steger contend, “people are more likely to pursue a purpose with their lives when they feel that their lives are valued and worthwhile” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 539). At the same time, having one of these components does not necessarily engender the other, as one can imagine feelings of significance that arise from relations with family and friends, but are not directly linked to future goals or purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016). Similarly, while having purpose in life often leads to significance, it may not always lead to positive emotions. As may be the case on Viktor Frankl’s (1959/1972) conception of finding purpose/meaning in suffering, “it is possible that truly meaningful moments might unfold in the absence of positive emotions” (Steger, 2009, p. 682).

Other scholars have argued for four or even seven different components of meaning, and still others remain fixed in the view the meaning is more about one facet than the other. Such revision and reworking of a model for meaning is sure to continue within the burgeoning field. Nevertheless, the conception provided by Martela and Steger is promising. Indeed, a tripartite conception of meaning in life, whether directly influenced by Martela and Steger (2016), or by other scholars in the meaning literature, has been gaining momentum (George & Park, 2016; Murphy, 2017). Such a conception is invaluable for a field stagnated by vague or inconsistently operationalized notions of meaning. George and Park (2016) hope that just such a trichotomy of meaning will help the field overcome such conceptual obstacles and help integrate research on meaning in life with broader meaning literature. They argue that “the tripartite view offers the flexibility and precision necessary to draw clear connections between MIL [meaning in life] and the broader literature” (p. 205).

However, even as we deconstruct “meaning” into its sub-dimensions, it is important to remember what unites them. As described above, meaning is about making connections between
mental representations, and interpreting and acting upon these. On Martela and Steger’s (2016) conception, this human ability to reflect on and interpret life is the characteristic that connects the three facets of meaning. Coherence is about more than just experiencing the world, but about forming a coherent mental representation about that world, having a cognitive map of the world that makes sense out of our experiencing. Purpose is not merely about doing things, but about articulated and valued motivations toward aligned behavior… significance is not merely about any kind of positive and negative feelings in life, but about the sense of value that arises when we evaluate our lives against some conceptual criteria (p. 538).

On their own, each component has benefits for an individual’s wellbeing, but taken together, they can form the foundation of a meaningful, flourishing life.

**Conclusion**

Meaning in life offers us a framework for talking about how religion boosts wellbeing in many different ways that also speaks to the importance of meaning—of subjective experiences in mental health, in religion, and in wellbeing. More importantly, it retains the interrelatedness of disparate mediators. I argue that religion boosts wellbeing because religious meaning systems more often and/or more easily produce a sense of meaning in life. Meaning in life, in turn, provides a myriad of benefits to people’s mental health and wellbeing. At the same time, meaning in life is a single concept, the aspects of which are separable and distinct, but deeply interrelated, such that an increase in one is likely to produce an increase in another. In this way, meaning in life can serve as a framework to discuss the many different possible pathways between religion and wellbeing, while also underscoring the ways in which religions can often bring together a number of these and, in doing so, reinforce them. I argue that this kind of positive feedback loop between the aspects of a meaningful life may explain the general tendency for religion to influence mental health in beneficial ways; more than just conferring one
or another factor that, on its own, is known to positively influence wellbeing, religions can confer a number of these, and allow them to strengthen each other, in ways that secular meaning systems cannot, or cannot as easily do. This, I argue, explains why we see a general trend between more religiosity (in contrast with less religiosity, or secularity) and positive mental health. Perhaps, then, if we can understand how religiosity confers wellbeing in a number of ways, and how these factors influence each other, as well as the particular components of religious meaning systems (generally speaking) that are particularly useful in this regard, we may be able to discover and strengthen pathways towards a meaningful life for those who are less religious.

Therefore, the rest of the work will put this theory to the test. Each chapter is devoted to one of the three subconstructs, as proposed by Martela and Steger (2016). First, I describe the ways in which that aspect relates to wellbeing and mental health on its own, and how religion is able to provide it. Then, I propose some ways in which religion appears to be particularly adept at providing and maintaining this aspect, in ways that other meaning systems cannot or cannot as easily do. It is likely not a perfect theory, but it is, I hope, the adequate and valuable beginning of a theory that is able to understand the relationship between religion and wellbeing, allowing us to explore the importance of a meaningful life, and possibly, how people find and keep it.
Chapter Two:

Coherence

Young children are often stereotyped as questioners. They pester their parents for explanations, and at times what ensues is a potentially endless conversation in which each response from a parent is met with the rebuttal, “why?” Why do cats have fur? Why do we sleep? Why does Dad snore? Often this is seen as an important developmental phase in which children come to learn about the world around them. However, this “phase” does not have an end. As adults, we continue to question, wonder, and be curious about the nature of reality or the unfolding of events. In the early years of quantum mechanics, the odd behavior of electrons prompted researches to understand why they behaved the way that they do; that is, to make sense of what they observed. In the aftermath of the chaotic 2016 election, Americans sought to make sense of what happened, and of themselves and their fellow Americans. In our everyday life, we ask why our friends and peers act in the way they do (e.g., “Why did you get so mad at him?” or “Why can’t you eat shellfish?”), as well as wonder why events occur, or things are the way they are (e.g. “Why did Britain vote for Brexit?” or “Why do pugs have breathing problems?”). From questions about why Dad snores, to why electrons do funny things, why natural disasters occur, or why we exist at all, consciously and not, humans are constantly engaged in this endeavor to make sense of their world.

Children ask questions in order to form a coherent understanding of the world, and adults continue this same process by reflectively appraising events in terms of their meaning systems,
and attending to inconsistencies in order to maintain coherence. The first Saturday Night Live episode after the election of Donald Trump featured a skit in which Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock, and several white SNL cast members watch the election results role in (Michaels, 2016). The white cast members grow increasingly distressed as Donald Trump wins one state after another, and, when his win is announced, react with surprise and call it “crazy.” Meanwhile, Chappelle and Rock, both black comedians, watch the events unfold calmly and are anything but shocked by the results.

The joke, of course, is that black people weren’t surprised by Trump’s win because they already knew the United States was racist. For the white cast members, the election of Donald Trump contradicted their implicit belief that the U.S. was generally too liberal and egalitarian to elect Trump, leading to their heightened distress upon his win. For Chappelle, Rock, and other black Americans, their belief that the U.S. was still racist and bigoted meant that they did not experience any dissonance between Trump’s win and their preexisting beliefs. Of course, this sketch is over-simplified, but plenty of media coverage following the election maintained this theme of people being shocked and confused at the results, and searching for answers to help them make sense of this result. Countless editorials were written to explain how this happened, each of them an instance of the author attempting to make sense of an event which had left their meaning systems inconsistent and incoherent. Indeed, this practice of working to rebuild understanding goes on in small and large ways every day as people navigate their worlds and seek to maintain an understanding of it.

In the psychological literature, this need to maintain coherence is so great that it is commonly acknowledged as a basic human imperative (e.g. Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Steger, 2009). Though this facet of meaning in life goes by many
different names, from coherence to comprehension (e.g. Martela & Steger, 2016; George & Park, 2016), all such accounts converge on an understanding that, in order to operate themselves within the world, people need to make sense of their surroundings; they seek “the feeling that one’s experiences or life itself makes sense” (Heintzelman & King, 2014, p. 154, as cited in Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 533). For example, self-verification theory posits that individuals seek a sense of understanding of the world and coherence within one’s beliefs about the world (George & Park, 2016). Research in this area has shown that individuals engage in “biased informational processing” (the unconscious practice of selectively biasing what information to prioritize or accept), and will seek out social environments that bolster their worldview so as to confirm their coherent understanding and avoid situations that may highlight contradictions in their beliefs and experiences (George & Park, 2016). Indeed, in the aftermath of the 2016 election, such sentiments are common. It has been widely noted that individuals prefer to engage with media outlets that share their pre-existing beliefs, and will manufacture ideas and “facts” to confirm these. In the era of “alternative facts,” such biases and fabrications have proliferated.

In some ways, then, we can sympathize with such biased informational processing. The aversive and anxious states individuals experience when their coherent understanding of the world is threatened can be damaging. Such states can occur in relatively trivial environments, such as experimental settings in which individuals are given word pairings that are inconsistent with their expectations (e.g., “cat” and “dog” make more sense as a word pair than “cat” and “ice cream”), and heightened, though relatively inconsequential, levels of distress and anxiety are reported (George and Park, 2016). On the other end of this spectrum, however, cognitive approaches to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often suggest inconsistencies between experiences and meaning frameworks as a cause of PTSD symptoms (George & Park, 2016).
Common, though perhaps not often explicit, beliefs that the world is safe and just are understandably shattered by traumatic experiences such as warfare or violence.

The reasoning for such distressing reactions to inconsistency has even been argued to have evolutionary roots (Martela & Steger, 2016; George & Park, 2016; Inzlicht, Tullett, & Good, 2011). Though evolutionary theories of human behavior are largely hypothetical, and difficult to test, we can perhaps accept the need for consistency between and among beliefs and experiences without explicitly arguing for an evolutionary basis. As George and Park (2016) describe, threat compensation literature argues that consistency is valuable because it serves important epistemic and pragmatic functions. As they describe, “inconsistency indicates that there are errors in one’s meaning frameworks, and accurate meaning frameworks are necessary for effectively navigating one’s life. In other words, if our beliefs about the world contradict one another, this inconsistency indicates that there are mistakes in our beliefs, and we cannot be relying on incorrect beliefs to operate in our environment” (p. 209). Pragmatically, determining which actions to take is difficult if one is unsure of how to make sense of the environment in the first place, and thus “conflicting meaning frameworks prevent knowing how to act in one’s environment” (George & Park, 2016, p. 209). As an example, when driving in a foreign country, not being able to make sense of road signs can pose a real danger, and determining which actions to take on the road is obviously more difficult without understanding such signs. Coherence is therefore an important part of our daily lives as well as our wellbeing.
Religion as Coherence

Along these lines, it can be easy to see how religiosity confers a coherent meaning system. For some people, religions are seen first and foremost as particular belief systems that espouse particular ontologies. Across all religions scholars have investigated, accounts of what the world fundamentally is and how it was created, as well as descriptions of humanity’s place in this metaphysic, are present (although their centrality and consistency may vary). From the creation myths of ancient Egypt, to Genesis or Hindu mythology, religions almost paradigmatically provide stories that explain the worlds we live in and make sense of our experiences. Even though the details within a religious belief system may seem to contradict, as in conflicting accounts of creation in Biblical stories, these are more often minor literary details, and adherents of a religion nevertheless regard the symbolic messages of religious texts as cohering even if literal details may not.

This ability of many religions to offer an explanation of the world, and provide a sense of order and coherence, a safe haven from chaos, has been argued throughout religious studies history to be both the fundamental function of religion, and the reason for its existence and proliferation. In his influential work The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion (1957/1987), Mircea Eliade argues that the sacred (e.g., transcendent or ultimately real) plane of existence manifests itself in the profane space—the plane in which humanity exists—and in doing so, founds the world. He argues

it is the break effected in [profane] space [by the sacred] that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation. When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world (p. 20-21).
In this way, Eliade argues, “the world stands displayed in such a manner that, in contemplating it, religious man discovers the many modalities of the sacred, and hence of being. *Above all, the world exists, it is there, and it has a structure; it is not a chaos but a cosmos, hence it presents itself as creation, as work of the gods*” (p. 117, emphasis added). For Eliade, religion grows out of a person’s experience of sacred and profane modes of existence. The sacred instantiates itself in the profane world, an act Eliade dubs “hierophany,” revealing in that profane space “an absolute fixed point, a center” (p. 21) around which religious persons construct and towards which they orient their lives and cosmos. Without such guiding points in space and time, Eliade contends, people would live in chaotic, unstructured worlds, or in his words, merely in “fragments of a shattered universe” (p. 24).

Though perhaps few scholars today would agree with the whole of Eliade’s work, the understanding of religion as providing structure, guidance, or meaning to an otherwise chaotic and confusing realm is shared by other preeminent scholars of religion. Edward Tylor (1874/1974) conceived of religion, in part, as an early science, the product of humanity’s drive to make sense of and explain the world around them. Perhaps most famously, Clifford Geertz (1966), as Park (2005) describes, argued that “religions provide possibilities that beneath the surface of the vicissitudes of life that seem beyond understanding, such as suffering and death, there is a basic pattern or rationale of order and purpose” (p. 299). Indeed, Geertz (1993) argued for defining religion as “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (p. 90, emphasis added). In tandem with Geertz, Peter Berger (1967) argued that society itself “is a world-building enterprise,” and that this “socially
constructed world is, above all, an ordering of experience. A meaningful order, or nomos, is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals” (p. 19).

Religion, Coherence, and Anxiety

Berger’s conception makes clear that, although we are talking about religion in this case, all persons and all societies engage in this act of imposing order and understanding on an otherwise chaotic and distressing world. Indeed, Berger (1967) argues that “the socially established nomos [“meaningful order”] may thus be understood, perhaps in its most important aspect, as a shield against terror” (p. 22). Even in 1967, when this famous work of Berger’s, *The Sacred Canopy*, was published, the idea that an ordered and coherent framework of existence soothed terror and served a biological instinct were present (p. 19, 22). Importantly, the need is for a worldview, but not necessarily a religious one. Berger and others contend that modern science serves this need without being religious, and therefore it is clear that one does not need *religion* in order to have a coherent understanding of the world. However, religion is so intimately tied into these meaning systems because, in line with Tylor (1874/1974), before modern science, “all cosmization has a sacred character… Viewed historically, most of man’s worlds have been sacred worlds. Indeed, it appears likely that only by way of the sacred was it possible for man to conceive of a cosmos in the first place” (Berger, 1967, p. 28).

Therefore, it is unsurprising that many scholars attribute the links between religion and wellbeing or mental health to the ability of religion to offer a coherent meaning system. This is precisely the position argued by Michael Inzlicht, Alexa M. Tullett, and Marie Good (2011), who present a motivated meaning making (MMM)\(^8\) account of religion. Their account posits that

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\(^8\) The MMM theory was first proposed by Steven J. Heine, Travis Proulx, and Kathleen D. Vohs (2006).
“religion’s palliative qualities come about because religion is a meaning system that offers explanation, order, and protection from chaos” (Inzlicht et al., 2011, p. 204). The MMM theory was first proposed by Steven J. Heine, Travis Proulx, and Kathleen Vohs (2006), and is, according to Martela and Steger (2016), the fullest elaboration of psychological models that posit a human need for meaning. According to MMM, and in line with what has already been argued here, “people have a need for meaning; that is, a need to perceive events through a prism of mental representations of expected relations that organizes their perceptions of the world” (Heine et al., 2006, p. 88). Furthermore, they argue that “a range of psychological motivations are expressions of a singular impulse to generate and maintain a sense of meaning” (p. 88).

Building upon the MMM model, Inzlicht et al. (2011) conducted a series of neuroscientific studies that explored links between religiosity, the idea that the world is ordered versus chaotic, and anxiety. Their work focused on the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), a region of the medial prefrontal cortex that is important in the experience of anxiety, and the error-related negativity (ERN), an event-related brain potential measured in EEG studies that, they argue, “is thought to relate to the negative affect, distress, and autonomic response of having just made an error” (p. 200). As such, they conducted an experiment in which participants had to perform a task that frequently produces errors, the Stroop color-naming task, and measured their distress levels through the EEG. The Stroop task a commonly used behavioral measure that asks participants to name the color in which color words are written. At times, the color of the word matches the semantic meaning of the word, as when the word “red” is written in red, making naming the color of the letters easy. At other times, the semantic meaning does not match the color in which the word is presented, as when the word “red” is written in green. The mismatch
between the color of the ink and the color indicated by the semantic meaning makes this task difficult and produces frequent errors.

Within this same general study set up, three studies were conducted. In the first study, the authors hypothesized that, because of religion’s claims that the world is ordered and coherent, religious zeal (characterized as “an ardent, even fanatic form of belief”) would predict lower error-related anxiety, as measured by ACC activity and the ERN. Religious zeal was measured with a scale that included items such as “In my heart I believe that my religious beliefs are more correct than others,” “My religious beliefs are grounded in objective truth,” and “I would support a war that defended my religious beliefs” (p. 200). As predicted, the authors found that “the more willing people were to endorse fervent statements about their religious belief, the lower their error-related response” (p. 201). That is, the higher an individual’s religious zeal, the less anxious they were likely to be in response to realizing they had made a mistake.

In the second study, a general measure of religiosity was used in place of religious zeal. This less fanatic form of religious belief was measured with questions about belief in God, with response options ranging from certain God does not exist to certain God exists. Here again, they found “a reliable association between religious conviction and the ERN” and thus concluded that “in two studies we found that religious conviction predicted less error-related brain activity, consistent with the view that religion acts like a palliative” (p. 201).

The third and fourth studies, instead of measuring levels of religiosity or religious zeal, primed participants with religious ideas.9 In one, they asked participants to either reflect on what their religion meant to them personally, or to reflect on their favorite season, and then had them

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9 “Priming” is a method used in psychological studies in which participants are subtly exposed to certain ideas or concepts in order to influence subsequent responses. For example, primes of the word “health” allow people to recognize the word “nutrition” more easily than the word “bat.”
perform the Stroop task. The results showed that those who had reflected on what religion meant to them, that is, those primed with religious ideas, showed less error-related distress than those who reflected on their favorite season.

More interestingly, the next priming study included both believers and non-believers. Here, the researchers asked participants to complete an ostensibly unrelated word-scramble task. For half the participants, the word-scramble included religious words, such as sacred or prophet, while the other half received word-scramble tasks with no mention of religion. This time, instead of religious primes predicting lower error-related distress across the board, religious primes only lowered the brain response in individuals who were religious. By contrast, non-believers who were given a religiously primed word-scramble actually showed an elevated error-related response, which the authors argue “is in line with the idea that the religious primes violated their own meaning-system” (p. 202). In this way, while their studies provide support for the idea that religion acts as an anxiolytic, they more importantly underscore the fact that it is order and coherence within one’s meaning system, often provided by religion, that produces anxiolytic effects. If it were religion itself that produced these effects, one would expect non-believers to be similarly shielded from the distress when they saw religious primes. However, their increased distress indicates that, for the non-religious, religious primes implicitly violated their meaning system.

The effects of order and coherence were most obviously demonstrated in the final study. Within the same basic set up, participants in this study were asked to read one of three fake newspaper articles, each of which primed one of three ideas: “(1) that the world is random and chaotic, (2) that the world is ordered, although not comprehensible for humans, and (3) that the world is ordered and humans can fully comprehend this order” (p. 205). Critically, this study
showed that participants who had been primed with ideas (2) and (3), that there is some form of order in the world, regardless of whether or not humans can comprehend it, showed lowered ERN responses, as they had predicted. Thus, primes of an ordered universe led to reduced distress, and importantly, “whether this order was personally scrutable or not did not affect subsequent states of error-related distress… [which] suggests that what is important is the existence of a ‘master-plan,’ and that personal knowledge of this plan is almost superfluous” (Inzlicht, Tullett, & Good, 2011, p. 205). Therefore, while it may be the case that religion’s palliative effects are, in part, the result of religion’s ability to confer a coherent meaning system, as Inzlicht et al. argued, it is important to underscore the fact that it is the coherence of the meaning system, not a characteristic of “religious” beliefs themselves, that is a predictor of wellbeing. Moreover, the details of the coherence may be of little importance; what matters more is a conviction that the world is explainable, not necessarily that we understand the explanations.

Along these lines, other scholars have found that it is the certainty with which one holds their beliefs, not necessarily the religiosity of them, that predict wellbeing. In reviewing the literature on religiosity and wellbeing, Luke Galen and James Kloet (2011) noted that “the prevailing view of the relationship between religiosity and mental health is a linear one; that more religiosity is associated with greater well-being” (p. 673). However, much of these linearly conceived studies do not accurately capture the nuances of religious and non-religious belief, and instead assume that religiosity relates to mental health in a similar way across the entire spectrum of belief. That is, such studies “often combined the low or weakly religious together with the completely non-religious or atheists” (p. 674), as in a study they cite by Myers (2000) that measured a single category of “not close [to God] or unbelieving.” Such a study, Galen and Kloet argue, conflates two separate groups, “those with weak belief and those with complete
non-belief, thus combining opposite poles on the certainty of belief dimension (i.e. weakly religious with confidently non-religious)” (p. 674).

To address this issue, Galen and Kloet conducted two studies, one comparing a church group with a secular group, and a second looking only at the secular group, that asked participants to rate their certainty that God exists (e.g., “absolutely certain God does not exist,” “mostly or somewhat certain God does not exist,” “unsure,” “mostly or somewhat certain God exists,” or “absolutely certain God exists”) as well as identify themselves with various religious/philosophical labels (e.g., “atheist,” “humanist,” “agnostic,” “spiritual,” “religious,” “theist,” “other,” or “I don’t know), and compared this to various measures of wellbeing and mental health, as well as demographic variables. Through this, they found “evidence of a curvilinear relationship” (p. 673). That is, they found that individuals who were certain God did not exist, and certain God did exist, scored higher on both emotional stability and life satisfaction measures. Those unsure or only somewhat or mostly sure that God either did or did not exist all reported variably lower levels of emotional stability and life satisfaction.  

Though the authors admit the data did not always fit a perfectly curvilinear function, they note that “in no analysis did those with confident disbelief in God (“absolutely sure”) differ in well-being from those with confident belief” (p. 686). Noting that their work is in line with literature that finds doubting one’s worldview to be associated with higher levels of distress (e.g.

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10 It is worth noting the possibility, in such survey responses, that individuals overstate the certainty of their religious beliefs for a myriad of reasons, or moreover, that “certainty” could more accurately be described as “commitment” or “faith.” In philosophy and theology, the relationship between certainty, faith, doubt, and skepticism are more intricate and debated than this study presumes (e.g. Verbin, 2002). Perhaps then this data more accurately measured participants’ commitment to or faith in their beliefs—those who responded that they were “certain” of God’s existence may be displaying a deep commitment to God’s existence, more than an actual veridical certainty. Similarly, one could presume that those who were confident in their disbelief could be said to be more committed to, or have more faith in, the claim that God does not exist. Whether one interprets the respondents’ “certainty” as faith, commitment, or true certainty does not effect the rhetorical use of this study and its results. For the sake of simplicity, the term “certainty” will be used in this work.

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Krause, Ingersoll-Dayton, Ellison, & Wulff, 1999, as cited in Galen & Kloet, 2011), Galen and Kloet conclude that “rather than specifically religious content being a prerequisite for mental well-being, it is likely that existential certainty or coherence of a worldview mediates the relationship between religious participation and mental health” (p. 686). Not only do their findings underscore the importance of accounting for and investigating the nuanced ways in which people are religious, spiritual, or atheistic, but it also provides further support for the idea that a coherent meaning system, regardless of religiosity, contributes to wellbeing.

The Uniqueness of Religious Coherence

The language of religion—faith, hope, transcendence, surrender, forbearance, meaning—speaks to the limits of human powers. When life appears out of control, and there seems to be no rational explanation for events—beliefs and practices oriented to the sacred seem to have a special ability to provide ultimate meaning, order, and safety in place of human questions, chaos, and fear.

— Pargament et al., 2005, as quoted in Park, 2005, p. 300.

Thus far I have argued that religion’s palliative effects can, in part, be explained by religion’s ability to confer a coherent meaning system, and an understanding of the world as ordered and explainable. To reiterate, this demonstrates that the meaning system need not be religious, just that it needs to assuage uncertainty and motivate an understanding of the world as ordered and comprehensible. Nevertheless, there are several important characteristics of religion that indicate why religion may be particularly good at conferring and maintaining a coherent meaning system.
Certainty

The first of these can actually be seen in some of the data of Galen and Kloet's (2011) study discussed above. Their results indeed show that, as they describe, “once religious and non-religious individuals are fairly compared regarding the strength of their beliefs… the differences between the two in terms of mental well-being are minimal” (p. 686). However, the data also demonstrated an important caveat: religious individuals in their study were also more likely to feel certain about their beliefs. Within the secular group, only 31% of participants were “absolutely certain” that God does not exist, with 44% being “mostly or somewhat certain,” 14% being unsure, and the rest, interestingly, actually affirming God’s existence at various levels of certainty. In the church group, the numbers break down much differently. Here, a whopping 95% of participants were “absolutely” certain that God exists, with only 3% and 2% claiming to be “mostly or somewhat certain” or “unsure,” respectively. Although secular and religious certainty indicated similar, higher levels of wellbeing, only a third of the secular group were certain, compared to the overwhelming majority of religious individuals. As such, these results indicate that religion’s wellbeing benefits may stem, in part, from an ability to instill a sense of certainty with regard to one’s beliefs.

The question, then, is why or how does religion tend to do such a good job of instilling certainty in its adherents? Some of the answer to this may simply be due to the prevalence of religion. For example, though secularity is increasing in much of the Western world, the vast majority of individuals in the United States still identify as religious. As such, secular individuals may have fewer people around them who agree with them, may have their views challenged more often, and may have come to their secular views only after having been raised with religious beliefs. All of these factors may mean that the secular population, in its relative infancy
and going against the grain, struggles more with being certain of their secular beliefs than religious individuals are of their religious beliefs.

More importantly, the structure of religiosity serves to foster certainty. In the study conducted by Inzlicht et al. (2011), primes of order and coherence were used to experimentally lower individual’s distress responses. Priming is used frequently in psychology to motivate certain ideas or concepts. In a similar way, the structure of many religious practices are rife with opportunities to reinforce religious beliefs. Christians are, each Sunday, primed to see the world as ordered and coherent, and motivated by sermons, Bible passages, and their religious community to be certain of these beliefs. Indeed, the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, recited often in some religious settings, ask individuals to literally reaffirm the certainty of their belief in God and their religious belief system. Muslims who pray five times a day are regularly reminded of their religious beliefs and their commitment to them. Other religious practices and symbols similarly keep these religious beliefs primed in individual’s minds, possibly reinforcing the certainty with which individual’s hold them.

In this way, religious meaning systems have an advantage over secular ones with respect to wellbeing as mediated through certainty, explaining in part why studies continue to show religiosity as being associated with better health measures. In that secularists exist in a religious minority, certainty of secular beliefs is continually questioned, whereas through religious practices and communities, certainty of religious belief is continually maintained.
More important than religion’s ability to encourage certainty, however, is its tendency to be comprehensive and wholesale.\(^{11}\) By this, I mean that religious beliefs tend to take the form of a total package of coordinated meanings that are delivered in a single, overarching narrative. Thus, when religion is incorporated into an individual’s meaning system, a unifying framework guides many disparate meanings. As Crystal Park (2005) describes,

The influence of religion on global beliefs is far-reaching. When religion is incorporated into people’s global meaning systems, their understanding of God or of the divine (e.g., as loving and benevolent, as wrathful) are connected to beliefs about the nature of people (e.g., inherent goodness, made in God’s image, sinful human nature), of the self (e.g., as unworthy of God, as chosen), and of this world (e.g., the coming apocalypse, the illusory nature of reality) as well as, perhaps, the next (e.g., Heaven, reincarnation). (p. 300)

While secular meaning systems may find a foundation in science, there are only so many aspects of an individual’s life that can be subsumed under a scientific framework. Beliefs about nature and the physical world may be greatly informed by biology, physics, and so on, but scientific understandings of the world can only go so far—beliefs about values and morality cannot be directly informed by a scientific view of the world. Since science is, at least nominally, an objective analysis of the physical world, it is not, in and of itself, a meaning system that can provide guidance in more subjective areas of life. That is not to say that morality cannot be had without religion, as some religious fundamentalists like to argue. Rather, it simply means that secular individuals must look beyond a single, unified meaning system to arrive at meanings outside the purview of scientific inquiry. Science alone cannot prove that humans are inherently good or bad, that we exist for a purpose, or tell us what we will experience when we die.

\(^{11}\) The idea that religion’s comprehensive and integrative beliefs may make it a more beneficial basis of a meaning system has been proposed by many scholars in this area of research, e.g., Park, 2005; Silberman, 2005; Uden & Zondag, 2014.
Opinions on such issues can be informed by scientific findings or principles, but the answers are not given, and it is not a given that the answers one arrives at will be equally satisfying.

Nihilistic philosophers may have entirely sound arguments to support their view that life is meaningless, but such a view is arguably less satisfactory than a view that life is meaningful, and, moreover, can only be arrived at by people properly trained in philosophy and with resources that allow them the time and effort it takes to arrive at philosophical conclusions. In this way, secular individuals likely need to integrate multiple meaning systems to cover beliefs about the natural world, themselves, their goals and aspirations, and their values, making it more likely that an individual’s beliefs may contradict one another.

Religions, on the other hand, provide a narrative of human existence that spans the entirety of the universe, and guides decisions and evaluations with regard to the many different facets of our lives, including and especially existential concerns. As Roy F. Baumeister (1991) contends, “religion deals with the highest levels meaning… it can interpret each life or each event in a context that runs from the beginning of time to future eternity,” and as such, “religion may not always be the best way to make life meaningful, but it is probably the most reliable way” (p. 205, as quoted in Park, 2005, p. 295). Decisions about who to marry, whether or not to have kids, how to conduct oneself in relationships with others, how to view one’s inevitable death or make sense of tragedies, or even which professional goals to pursue can all be informed by religious meaning systems.

Of course, not every religious person in fact has a meaning system that is, in its totality, informed by religion. The meaning systems conception of religion allows for those who make religion a more integral part of their lives to have a meaning system that relies more on religious beliefs, and therefore have a more comprehensive meaning system overall. Indeed, this provides a framework for making sense of studies that frequently find wellbeing to be related to the extent to which religion is important in individuals’ lives.
As such, the more an individual relies on religious beliefs to construct their meaning system, the less likely it is that they will discover discord between their multitude of beliefs, actions, and feelings. In this way, religions are often better able “to give unity to all other concerns… and to serve as an integrating framework that can reduce the overall conflict within a person’s goal system and can foster coherence in personality” (Silberman, 2005, p. 648). Indeed, this notion that sacrality has the ability to touch all aspects of life is frequently noted. Frank Watts (2017) has argued that religious practices such as prayer allow otherwise insignificant events to find meaning within an overall religious framework. As he describes,

The religious framework gives significance to events that would have lacked significance, and events that had a nonreligious significance find a new one through a process of reframing. Equally, events that were initially interpreted in a nonreligious way are reinterpreted within the religious framework. All events are related to core religious values. The result is a single meaningful framework that gives significance to all events in a coherent and integrative way. Within religious meaning making, everything coheres. (p. 99)

In this way, religiously informed meaning systems are more likely to be coherent, as they relate all events and meanings back to a single, unified framework. This may reduce instances of cognitive dissonance, provide guidance in making sense of conflicting beliefs, or simply underscore an individual’s experience of coherence within their meaning system. Given that anxiety can arise from situations which “evoke two or more conflicting response options,” persons who less often have conflicting responses, or have a system in place for the evaluation of conflicting beliefs or responses (e.g., “if a religious belief I have conflicts with a secular belief I have, I should always default to the religious belief”) may experience less anxiety (Gray & McNaughton, 2000, as cited in Inzlicht et al., 2011, p. 198). In this way, religion’s ability to confer a coherent meaning system and imbue it with ultimate importance (as in dealing with high-level meaning and aligning all other beliefs under it) give us one understanding of why
religiosity is so commonly associated with higher levels of wellbeing: religious individuals subscribe to a meaning system that is coherent and adept at maintaining that coherence.

Along these lines, it is often said that religion is uniquely capable of providing answers to the existential questions we all encounter (Silberman, 2005; Uden & Zondag, 2014; Galek et al., 2015), such as

Who am I? What should I do with my life to make it worthwhile? What can I do to find happiness and life satisfaction? How can I make the right choices in an age of moral ambiguity and conflicting values? Where do I belong and where can I call home? What is the point of living in the face of suffering and death? What happens after death? (Wong, 2012, p. xxx, as cited in Galek et al., 2015)

Such questions are paradigmatically answered in the realm of religion. That is not to say that non-religious individuals are doomed to a life of existential uncertainty, of course—religion is not strictly necessary to arrive at satisfactory answers. However, religion may provide answers to these questions in a more accessible and assured way. In part, religion’s ability to answer these questions comes from its connection to an authority. As Mircea Eliade (1957/1987) describes, “religion is the paradigmatic solution for every existential crisis… because it is believed to have a transcendental origin and hence is valorized as a revelation received from an other, transhuman world” (p. 210). Therefore, one needn’t worry about whether or not the answers arrived are correct; God has given these answers and as such one can be assured of their truth.

Moreover, the answers to these questions are often a central feature of religion, and as such, individuals who subscribe to religious beliefs have likely encountered satisfying answers to these existential questions before they have even really encountered the need to answer them. Young children may wonder what happens after they die, but it is likely not yet imperative that they find an answer. At the same time, the narratives they receive in their religious upbringing are already having a conversation about these issues. When existential uncertainty arises or
becomes a problem, religious individuals have textual and authoritative resources and community members to turn to, while secular individuals may not. As such, religions may be particularly capable of conferring a coherent meaning system, both because of the vast range of issues and meanings subsumed under their narratives, and because they are adept at maintaining coherence in the face of existential uncertainty.

**Malleability: Religion’s “Attributional Blank Check”**

The idea that religious meaning systems are more coherent than, say, scientific theories, may seem improbable to some. After all, religions are frequently seen to contain objectively contradictory beliefs or prescriptions. For example, the Bible offers two contrasting stories of Genesis, and describes God as formless, genderless, and timeless while also giving stories of Him physically and temporally intervening in the lives of humans. How can such an incoherent narrative offer and maintain coherence?

For one, it is important to note that coherence is a subjective experience and not an impartial appraisal of the totality of one’s beliefs. That is to say, many people won’t realize their beliefs don’t cohere until it’s pointed out to them. As an example, consider a study conducted by Donald Everhart and Salman Hameed (2013), in which Pakistani Muslim doctors and medical students living in the United States were interviewed about their views on evolution and Islam. In these interviews, participants were asked a series of questions that sought to understand how they integrated and made sense of Quranic and scientific attitudes towards human evolution. Since the Quran offers an account of human creation that is, if taken literally, in opposition to the account given by scientific theories of evolution, the authors of this study hoped to understand how Muslim doctors dealt with this contradiction. While some participants sided with one
account or the other, or had ways of integrating the two, others had simply never thought about it. That is, they had held objectively contradictory views for some time, but never experienced their overall meaning systems as incoherent simply because the contradiction had never been apparent to them. The same is often true of non-religious people—indeed, most people likely hold some measure of contradictory beliefs—but feelings of dissonance arise only on the perception of such incoherence, not with its mere existence.

That is not to say that religious coherence disintegrates when one points out contradictory notions to religious believers. This fact is obvious to many critical of religion, who will often deride religious individuals as idiotic for appearing to flip-flop on or selectively choose their beliefs. For example, a common reason Evangelical Christians give for opposing gay marriage cites a biblical passage declaring it an abomination for men to lie with men as they do with women. In response to this, proponents of gay marriage often point out that these people are selectively choosing which Bible passages to uphold, as they appear to no longer follow passages that, say, prohibit the consumption of shellfish. This argument, of course, very rarely sways the Evangelical Christian’s beliefs. While a large part of the reason for this has to do with cognitive and emotional aspects of belief, identity, and religion that are beyond the scope of this paper, it also points to the malleability of religious beliefs.

Here it is important to note that many religious individuals do not take the content of their sacred texts as literal, and instead interpret and relate to them in a metaphorical or symbolic way. As such, they are aware of literal inconsistencies, yet take the symbolic messages to be overall coherent. Belief systems that are more malleable are likely better able to make sense of contradictory notions and maintain coherence.
Indeed, this idea may be supported by evidence that shows wellbeing being related to the attitude religious people take to their beliefs. Janssen, Bänziger, Dezutter, and Hutsebaut (2005) conducted a study that found that higher levels of wellbeing were correlated with participants who took a symbolic attitude towards their religious beliefs, rather than those who took a literal attitude toward them. While it is interesting to keep in mind their findings that, nevertheless, both literal and symbolic believers rated higher on levels of well-being than unbelievers, they underscore the benefits attained by holding beliefs that can conform to different situations and maintain coherence throughout. Their findings also uphold previous work that has found negative correlations between well-being and religious fundamentalists or orthodoxy (e.g. Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012).

In this way, the malleability of religious meaning systems may further contribute to the maintenance of coherence within an individual’s meaning system. As Silberman (2005) contends, “the complexity of major religions that tend to include within themselves a wide variety of messages (e.g., encouragements of both conflicts and their resolutions), and their malleability (i.e., the ability of major religions to develop and change over time)… allow religions to accommodate to different situations [and] may explain to a certain extent the resiliency of religion throughout history” (p. 651). In this way, religious belief systems can reflexively accommodate the meaning needs of individuals in ways that secular ideologies may not be able to.

For example, religion’s malleability makes it uniquely capable of providing satisfying explanation for random occurrences that a strictly scientific meaning system simply cannot. One such example comes from the work of anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard, who described how Azande people made sense of coincidental events by supposing the involvement of witchcraft.
Every so often in Zandeland, an old granary would collapse due to decay, termites, and years of use. Sometimes, these granaries would collapse while people were sitting under them to relax and escape the heat, resulting in injuries and deaths. In these cases, the Azande would account for the coincidence of such events with witchcraft. Although the Azande fully understood that “the supports were undermined by termites and that people were sitting beneath the granary in order to escape the heat and glare of the sun,” they “know besides why these two events occurred at a precisely similar moment in time and place. It was due to the action of witchcraft” (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 23). It would, Evans-Pritchard cautions, be false to say that Zande philosophy believed witchcraft to be the sole cause of any phenomena; instead, they “only assert that witchcraft brings a man into relation with events in such a way that he sustains injury” (p. 22). On a purely naturalistic conception, the presence of people under the granaries at the exact moment it collapsed is essentially random—a coincidence. As Evans-Pritchard (1976) notes, “we have no explanation of why the two chains of causation intersected at a certain time and in a certain place, for there is no interdependence between them” (p. 23). The Zande philosophy, on the other hand, “can supply the missing link” (p. 23). In this way, supernatural meaning systems can provide explanations that make sense of events and tragic accidents in a more satisfying way than secular ideologies can.

The same can be seen in South Africa, where witchcraft is sometimes used to make sense of the tragedies of the AIDS epidemic. Cristine H. Legare, Karl S. Rosengren, E. Margaret Evans, and Paul L. Harris (2012) note that people often understand unprotected sex as the reason an individual develops AIDS, but incorporate supernatural explanations to describe why a specific individual had unprotected sex with an HIV+ person. They explain that “witches are believed to be capable of distorting your sense of good judgment or putting an AIDS-infected
person in your path” (p. 784), and in this way, “the proximate cause was identified as unprotected sex, whereas the final cause is believed to be witchcraft” (p. 787). When one looks for explanations of happenstance in science, the answer is often unsatisfying—a simple coincidence, bad luck. This kind of coincidence ties into ideas of uncertainty; these kind of “dumb luck” explanations of tragedies imply the notion that one cannot be certain such unlucky luck won’t befall them if they sit under a granary, or board a plane, or have sex. As such, the inability to explain random events in a more satisfying way threatens the certainty of one’s beliefs, and fails to satisfactorily make sense of or give meaning to why particular events occurred. If, however, a religious meaning system can explain random events as the work of an intentional God or supernatural being, meaning and significance are maintained, and chaotic randomness is assuaged.  

Not only can religious meaning systems make sense of random occurrences, but they are furthermore uniquely capable of maintaining order and coherence in the face of entirely inexplicable situations. This is the notion Roy F. Baumeister (1991) has described as the “attributional blank check” with which many religions are endowed (as cited in Park, 2005). This is the idea that religions often posit the idea of an ordered universe that is nevertheless incomprehensible to people. That is, when it comes to making attributions about why an event

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13 It may seem that the certainty and malleability of religious meaning systems appear to contradict one another. While there may be some measure of tension between the two—being certain of a belief may make it difficult to reconcile events that appear to contradict it—it is more than possible for a meaning system to maintain both certainty and flexibility. For example, if an individual is certain that God loves and protects them, the occurrence of a tragic event in their life may seem to contradict this belief. In response to such an event, however, the individual can mold their understanding of why it happened to affirm their original beliefs. Perhaps the event had to happen in order for something better to happen in the future, or perhaps the lessons an individual learns from such an event make them a better person. The certainty with which one believes in God’s love and protection can be maintained precisely because the meaning of certain events can be molded to fit within this narrative. The certainty of religious beliefs can coexist with the flexibility of religious meaning systems because the meaning of events can be made sense of in terms of these beliefs. Indeed, being able to make satisfying sense of tragic events and maintain benevolent religious beliefs appears to be a fundamentally important factor in recovering from traumatic events—another wellbeing component in which religious people fair better than the non-religious (see Park, 2005, 2012, for more).
has occurred, religious meaning systems come with a failsafe: if the individual cannot make sense of it, they can be satisfied with the idea that “God works in mysterious ways,” such that even though the world seems chaotic and disordered, it is all ultimately the work of a sensible, loving God. In this way, “religious explanations can allow religious individuals to trust that every event, regardless of its initial appearance and painfulness, is part of God’s plan” (Park, 2005, p. 306).

Indeed, this is precisely the notion that Inzlicht et al. (2011) argued for, discussed above. As the authors note, “religion suggests that there is an order to the universe, even when things appear inexplicable” (p. 197). The results of their studies showed that notions of the universe as coherent and orderly was able to experimentally lower distress responses in participants. Importantly, the anxiolytic effects of coherence were present whether or not the coherence was knowable to humans. As Inzlicht et al. describe,

religion also espouses an order that is not transparent, often mysterious, and only knowable to an external agent. It therefore offers an advantage over other forms of belief or meaning—it is immune from falsification and thus adherents can be confident that it will stand the test of time… People refuse to believe that they’re at the mercy of a chaotic and meaningless universe, and in many ways religion assures them that this is not the case (p. 208).

In this way, religion’s malleable explanations that make sense of otherwise random occurrences and allow for explanations that are beyond human understanding make religious meaning systems uniquely capable of maintaining coherence where secular would often ideologies fail.

Of course, this malleability is often criticized by non-religious people, as when atheists deplore so-called “God of the gaps” arguments. In the relations between science and religion, “God of the gaps” arguments are those that find ways to insert God into whatever “gaps” remain in otherwise valid scientific reasoning. For example, those that say evolution is real, but God began it, or began life, are giving God a causal role in the areas of a scientific theory that science
has yet to be able to fully explain. This apparently endless flexibility of religious belief systems may infuriate some atheists, but nevertheless provides a benefit that science cannot. God may work in mysterious ways, but science cannot. This tendency of religion to avoid disconfirmation, then, allows for it to maintain coherence where secular ideologies cannot. God can never be disproven, and, moreover, can be invoked to explain any number of chaotic events. Scientific claims, by their very nature, can be refuted with evidence. As such, a particular scientific worldview is neither guaranteed to stand the test of time, nor guaranteed to make sense of the totality of an individual’s experiences. In this way, as Murphy (2017) describes,

Most religious worldviews provide a degree of certainty and safety that a random and unfeeling universe, however wondrous it may be perceived as being, simply cannot. If one marker of an effective meaning system is its ability to provide sufficient causation and explanation for events, then, at least superficially, religious meaning systems do have an advantage over purely materialistic ones. Atheists may question whether such models provide genuine explanations or merely alter the questions (e.g., Dawkins, 2006) but a meaning system should be considered functional if it is sufficient for the needs of the individual who has constructed it (p. 5-6).

In spite of their apparent contradictions, religious meaning systems, and the way individuals relate to these meaning systems, tend to be better able to satisfactorily confer and maintain coherence than secular ones. As such, individuals with religious meaning systems are able to benefit from a coherent, malleable, and explanatorily satisfying meaning system, explaining part of why religiosity is associated with wellbeing in general, and explaining, in more particular studies, why those who relate to their religion in a symbolic and flexible way, make religion a central aspect of their lives, and regularly practice their religion experience wellbeing beyond religious individuals who don’t.
Chapter Three:

Purpose

Matt Sherman spent 13 years of his life in Iraq and Afghanistan, participating in one of the United States’ longest wars. He is not alone. Each year, hundreds of people enlist in the U.S. armed services. They know what they are signing up for—armed conflict, hardship, suffering. Why would healthy young people willingly give up their lives, their health and safety, their families and friends, to put on a uniform and travel half way around the world? In an interview with National Public Radio in 2016, Matt Sherman explains his own reasoning:

I wanted to take part in something… It's not an adrenaline thing. It's a sense of purpose thing for me. You're part of something that's much larger than yourself. You work with colleagues that put their all into something. You have people who - whose lives are being impacted for better and for worse… Even though these sorts of tours are very challenging and very disappointing at times, they also give a great sense of purpose that is really difficult to duplicate elsewhere. (Sherman, 2016)

His answer is unsurprising—almost obvious. American citizens lay their lives on the line because they believe they are contributing to a greater good; they find a purpose in their lives through protecting and defending their fellow citizens. Of course, not everyone who enlists in the army does so for this reason or this reason alone; there are financial and educational incentives, there are those who enjoy the camaraderie and thrill, and likely countless other reasons. The overarching purpose they have, whatever that is, allows them to push through both the drudgery and the danger that come with active combat.

Military service may engender this sense of purpose, but combat is not the only way people find it. For some, parenthood is their ultimate purpose. Having and raising healthy, happy
children is the motivation that carries them through sleepless nights, endless tantrums, and the financial burden of caring for another human being. Parenthood can be terrifying and exhausting, but its trials and tribulations serve a higher purpose—one that may be connected to the parent’s religion, community, or family tradition, or to their self-identity—and this not only fosters feelings of significance, pride, and joy, but it also motivates them through day-to-day difficulties. For others, this motivation may be in their career—in making a difference through their charitable work, in educating the next generation, in making a name for themselves, or in amassing wealth. Our motivations in life, the goals we have for ourselves, and the future we imagine pull us through drudgery and exhaustion, suffering and fear, and orient our actions towards a future state of being.

As a component of a meaningful life, purpose enjoys a prominent place. Indeed, Sommer, Baumeister, and Stillman (2012) argue that

A sense of purpose probably comes closest to everyday conceptions of life’s meaning… To believe in life’s purpose is to believe that one is here for a reason, whether that reason is chosen by oneself, assigned by society, of decreed by divine powers. People have a sense of purpose in life when they perceive that their current behaviors are linked to future, desired outcomes. (p. 300)

Because of its perceived centrality to meaning in life, there is a wealth of literature on the concept of purpose in life and life goals. One of the earliest and most famous proponents of the human need for meaning in life, and of purpose as the central aim of meaning, was the psychologist Viktor Frankl (1959/1972). Through the tragedy and hardship he himself experienced at the hands of Nazis in a concentration camp, Frankl formed his particular form of therapy, logotherapy, that places a need for meaningful purpose in life at the center of well-being, and even, survival; “to live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering. If there is a purpose in life at all, there must be a purpose in suffering and dying” (Frankl,
In Frankl’s sense, meaning in life is about having a reason to live, a purpose for one’s continued existence.

Since Frankl’s writing, countless other scholars have discussed purpose and life goals as central to meaning in life, and to physical and emotional well-being. Various definitions and conceptions of purpose have been proposed, such as psychologists George and Park’s (2016) definition of purpose as “the extent to which individuals experience their lives as being directed and motivated by valued life goals” (p. 210), or psychologists Mcknight and Kashdan’s (2009) “central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning” (as quoted in Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 534). Though these definitions vary, scholars tend to agree that to have purpose in life means to have highly valued, future-oriented goals that “give direction to life” and, in doing so, “lend significance to one’s present actions” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 534). As Michael F. Steger describes, “purpose is the need to do...[It’s] an anchor we throw out into the future... [an] aspiration we have [that] keeps the future alive in us, and... when the present is too hard... serves as a source of solace. We can transcend what’s happening now because out there is a big dream that we’re pursuing” (TEDx Talks, 2013). In this way, purpose connects the present to the future and our daily life to our long-term aspirations; it motivates our actions and informs our choices.

**Purpose, Goals, and Wellbeing**

Every day, people wake up, get out of bed, and decide what they will do for that day. Whether it consists of going to work or school, eating a healthy breakfast, socializing with friends, or working on a creative hobby, we all make small decisions about how to spend our time that, though they may seem disconnected from the grander purposes of military combat or
political activism, are nevertheless informed by our longer term goals. Maybe you don’t want to go to work, but you do because you want to maintain financial stability, or because you want to make enough money to send your children to college. Maybe you hate school, but you go anyway because you want good grades and a good attendance record to get into your dream college or university, which will then lead you to your dream job. Doctors suffered through medical school because they wanted to become a practitioner. Perhaps they wanted to be a medical doctor because they wanted to be financially stable in the future, or because they wanted to learn all they could about the human body, or because they wanted to do something with their lives that helped others. Whatever the reason, a broader, personally valuable, future goal informed their decisions to enroll in school, stay up late to finish a project, and make it to class every day, and kept them motivated enough to make it through the stress and exhaustion of university. Every day, consciously or not, successfully or not, we are working towards an idea of our future selves that guides our present actions, and pushes us through our present suffering, boredom, or exhaustion.

Of course, though we may all have goals and work to meet them, we do not all have a sense of purpose in life. We may get up and go to work, but still feel as though we are not living up to our potential, or not pursuing what is truly important to us. For this reason, we must draw a distinction between goals and purpose. Everyone may have goals; as Robert Emmons (1999) contends, “there is perhaps no characteristic more fundamentally human than the capacity to imagine future outcomes and to devise means to attain these outcomes” (p. 3). Goals represent “how people structure and experience their lives—they are critical constructs for understanding the ups and downs of everyday life, and they are key elements for understanding both the positive life as well as psychological dysfunctions” (Emmons, 2005, p. 734). However, simply
having goals does not necessarily mean one has a purposeful life. As Martela and Steger (2016) describe, “purpose is not merely about doing things, but about articulated and valued motivations toward aligned behavior” (p. 538). The kinds of goals we pursue, how we think about them, and how important they are to us are critical factors in whether or not a person will feel they live a purposeful life.

Goals have been described as “an imagined or envisioned state condition towards which a person aspires and which drives voluntary activity” (Karoly, 1993, p. 274, as cited in Emmons, 2005, p. 732), and as “representing the typical or characteristic objectives that individuals try to accomplish in their everyday behavior” (Emmons, 1999, p. 3). Goals are further assumed to “exist within a system of hierarchically organized superordinate and subordinate goals, where functioning in one aspect of the system has ramifications for other parts of the system” and in this way, “are part of a larger motivational system that forms a complex hierarchy, the levels of which differ in generality and abstractness of the intentions involved” (Emmons, 1999, p. 22). Goals organize behavior, and influence our thoughts and emotions with respect to “the nature of our goals and the status of their pursuits” (Emmons, 2005, p. 733; see Emmons, 1999, for a review of relevant literature).

In this way, our goals serve as important moderators for our wellbeing. Often, simply having goals may be associated with wellbeing. Indeed, as Steger (2012a) notes “a lack of interest and heightened indecisiveness is likewise part of the symptom profile of some psychopathological syndromes, including depression” (p. 168). Depressive symptomatology includes a lack of motivation and concentration, underscoring the connections between feelings of wellbeing and having and pursuing goals. However, both scholars and common sense conclude that “when it comes to contributing to well-being, not all goals are equal” (Emmons,
2005, p. 736). Just as discussed before, simply having the goal of going to work, or writing a paper for school, and meeting it, does not necessarily lead to feelings of wellbeing—the outcomes of these pursuits matter. A bad grade on a paper may lead to negative emotions because it could be perceived as a roadblock towards the goal of graduating, or it may seem to hinder the goal of being intelligent or well-regarded by one’s professors. If one’s purpose in life is to get a Ph.D and become a professor, a continued inability to meet shorter-term goals of getting good grades and graduating would have a deleterious effect on their wellbeing. In this way, more than just having goals, “goal attainment seems to be a major benchmark for the experience of well-being” (Emmons, 2005, p. 733).

Perhaps more important than the status of one’s goals are the nature of and an individual’s orientation to these goals. The kinds of goals we choose to pursue, and how we relate to them (e.g., having a goal because someone else pressures us to as opposed to having a genuine passion to pursue a goal) seem to play a vital role in wellbeing. These factors in many ways distinguish those who simply have goals, from those who feel they have a purposeful life. If the goal of being a doctor is chosen because an individual has a genuine passion for helping others or healing the sick, then pursuing this path may genuinely contribute to feelings of wellbeing. If, however, the goal of being a doctor is sought only because an individual’s parents force it upon them, then it is far less likely to lead to feelings of meaningful purpose. Similarly, concrete, daily goals such as emptying the dishwasher or getting a haircut are unlikely to facilitate wellbeing if these are not seen as part of a long-term, meaningful pursuit. Purpose in life, therefore, is about having and pursuing goals that are informed by an individual’s values, and chosen because the individual finds ultimate importance in them. As Steger (2012a) contends, “the type of goal orientation intended by the term purpose suggests a mission that can
motivate persons for long periods of time, organizing their activities toward long-term, highly valued goals” (p. 168).

It is this sense of the word “purpose” that demonstrates a positive correlation with wellbeing. George and Park (2016) summarize studies conducted using the Life Engagement Test, which was created to measure an individual’s sense of having personally valuable goals. These studies have found that higher scores on this scale are negatively correlated with mental health variables such as anxiety and depression, and even show negative correlations with more objective negative health indices, such aortic calcification, blood pressure, and even mortality. These findings, in accordance with others (e.g., Emmons, 2005; Steger, 2012a; Wrosch et al., 2012), demonstrate that goals engender wellbeing to the extent that they are personally meaningful and valuable. As George and Park (2016) note, “goal pursuit will lead to well-being to the extent that individuals are pursuing goals that are congruent with their core interests and values… goal pursuit provides a sense of fulfillment to the degree that one’s goals reflect one’s true desires” (p. 211, emphasis in original). More so than just having goals, the “self-concordance of goals—the degree to which one’s goals are concordant with one’s interests and values—positively predicts well-being” (p. 211). It is further theorized that those individuals who have a deeper sense of purpose in life may have more developed and articulated high-level goals, which then motivate them to pursue lower level goals in accordance with these in their daily lives; “In other words, people with more purpose would be expected to pursue and engage in more valued activities on a day-to-day basis” (George & Park, 2016, p. 212).

In this way, purpose, when contrasted with less meaningful goal pursuits, is highly subjective, often related to an individual’s sense of self, and even engages with a more existential level of human thought and behavior. Individuals’ meaning systems “outline for them what ends
and states are desirable and worth striving for” (George & Park, 2016, p. 210). For Matt Sherman, putting his life on the line in military combat represented an important personal value of sacrificing himself for his country. For some Christians, beliefs about family and religion motivate them to value parenthood above all else. For a doctor, their purpose could be tied to ideas that valorize money, prestige, helping others, or gaining knowledge and insight. In this way, one’s goals “reflect subjective experience, values, and commitments as uniquely identified by the person” (Emmons, 2005, p. 732).

Because purposes are related to subjective values, ideals, and beliefs, they are also related deeply to an individual’s sense of self. As Robert Emmons (2005) notes, goals “provide information not only on what a person is trying to do, but also on who a person is trying to be—the relatively high-level goals that are central aspects of a person’s identity” (Emmons, 2005, p. 732). Matt Sherman’s purpose is likely inextricably linked to his identity as a soldier or veteran, people who seek parenthood identify themselves as mothers, fathers, and parents, people who hope to one day win an Oscar likely call themselves actors, and so forth. As Wrosch et al. (2012) note, “in a very real sense, goals provide the impetus for action, give life its direction, and help define who the person is” (p. 540).

In this way, goals and purposes are often related to deeper existential motivations in an individual’s life. Although a parent’s desire to get their children to school on time may feel unrelated to anything profound, it is nevertheless related, however distantly, to their goals of being a good parent, or raising healthy and happy children. These goals may be further related to existential questions of who one is or what their life is for. Emmons (1999) describes how goals are related to someone’s overall meaning in life, in that

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?” individuals’ implicit worldview beliefs give rise to goal concerns that reflect how they “walk with ultimacy” in daily life. (p. 6-7)

To summarize, though we all may conduct our lives and actions based on certain goals, we do not all have purpose in life in the sense meant by Frankl and other scholars. Purpose in life begins in the realm of high-level, personally meaningful, long-term aspirations, and then gives rise to more concrete goals that are hoped to lead a person to that specific, important end.

Religion as Purpose

With this more existential, personally valuable, and intrinsically motivated understanding of purpose, it is easy to see why religion is widely recognized as being central to the life purposes of many individuals (Sommer, Baumeister, & Stillman, 2012; Park, 2005; Emmons, 1999). Whether one interprets one’s life purpose as achieving salvation, helping others, martyring themselves, or simply pleasing God, the influence of religion on one’s ultimate purpose in life is common. Robert Emmons (2005) argues that, though “the use of goal language in discussions of spirituality and religion may seem foreign…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 & Park, 1995, p. 15) and the strategies to reach those ends” (Emmons, 2005, p. 737). Especially with regard to some Eastern religious traditions, such as those that advocate a cessation of striving and attachment, the use of goal language can seem out of place. However, goal language is actually frequent in many of these traditions; in the example of traditions advocating cessation of attachment or strivings, there is a state of being (unattached, at peace with oneself or the universe) that one hopes to achieve. Even
if a Buddhist monk does not make a concerted effort to achieve Nirvana, it still exists as an endpoint to be realized (Emmons, 2005), and they still engage in specific actions that are connected with this purpose (e.g., meditation, asceticism). Though Emmons contention of the “basic functions” of religion could perhaps more accurately be described as an important function of the major world religions, and not religion everywhere and anywhere, his point is valid—goals are frequent an implicit and explicit part of religion.

Of course, having a religious purpose does not make it a benevolent one. The annals of history are rife with examples of individuals causing egregious harm to others in order to pursue their own religiously informed life goals. In today’s climate, discussions of purpose in the context of religion remind us of the religiously inspired purpose that has led to terrorist attacks, suicide bombings, and wars. The impetus for such violence, however differently it is carried out, is that it is God’s wish or command for individuals to take part in it; that their reason for living is to defend God or obey his wishes. Many religions encourage “connecting to or adhering to the sacred” as their ultimate motivation (Silberman, 2005, p. 646), and though different traditions have different pathways to achieving this purpose, with varying effects on societal wellbeing, the general motivation to connect with the sacred or divine can offer a deep sense of purpose.

The Uniqueness of Religious Purpose

It is clear that one need not be religious to have a purpose in life, and that non-believers may be just as fulfilled, and find their lives just as purposeful, as believers’. However, there are a number of ways in which a religious meaning system may be uniquely suited to confer and maintain a sense of purpose in life.
God’s Plan

Religions may be more adept at conferring feelings of purpose simply in that they often teaches *that there is* a purpose to life or a particular purpose for an individual’s life. As Pargament (1997) notes, “underlying the search for religious purpose is the belief that life has an ultimate goal… According to most religious perspectives, each of us has a reason for being; no matter how terrible our situation may be, every person is said to have a special mission or calling in life” (p. 237). In this way, individuals with religious meaning systems may be more likely to feel that they have a purposeful life simply because they have been taught that this is the case. Notions of God as having a plan for one’s life, or of an individual as being a part of God’s larger plan, are common, especially among Christian and Islamic faiths. For example, Mattis (2002) conducted a small, qualitative study in which she interviewed 23 African American women on how they cope with adversity. Sixteen of these women indicated that religion or spirituality played a role in their lives, and, of these, eleven “insisted that there is a purpose… to their existence” (p. 314).

In this way, religion further frames purpose as a particular reason or goal that one must *discover* rather than construct. As one of the women from the above study described, “I believe that there’s a bigger picture here. And, I’m just a pawn in the game” (Mattis, 2002, p. 314). In another qualitative study, Fletcher (2004) interviewed twelve women about religion and meaning in life. Many of their responses demonstrate this idea that God created each of them for a specific purpose, and their job was not so much to choose a life purpose, but to discover one that had been chosen for them by God.

When asked what she thought her purpose in life was, Leah responded, “I think it’s meant that I was put here to put as much brightness into everyone’s life that I could”…
For Gloria, the purpose of her life was to please God. She believed He wanted her to share His love with others: “He wants me to go and tell those that don’t know about Him or aren’t close to Him and I’m hoping that I can have my light shine.” (p. 178).

These responses are in line with Pargament’s (1997) notion that religious purpose (in the context of many, but not necessarily all traditions) “is not constructed by the person; it is constructed for the individual” (p. 237). Furthermore, Pargament argues that this sense of discovering a predetermined purpose, rather than choosing one, is more in line with the sense of meaning advocated for by Viktor Frankl. He contends that

Frankl asks people to discover a new meaning in life. Implicit in his therapy is the assumption that there is a ‘right’ and ‘true’ meaning for every individual and every situation, a meaning that, in some sense exists ‘out there.’ In this respect, logotherapy is fundamentally religious; it assists people in a basic method of religious coping—the search for religious purpose, the search for each individual’s spiritual vocation in life. (p. 385)

In this sense, then, a religious individual may be primed with the notion that they have a purpose, and must discover it, which would increase the chances that they feel they have a purpose, and that their purpose is of ultimate, transcendental importance.

Beyond simply believing that they have a purpose in life, a religiously inspired purpose may be better able to confer wellbeing for several reasons. Rather simplistically, the simple notion that God has chosen a unique purpose for an individual takes some responsibility off of the individual’s shoulders. If purpose is seen as the kind of thing someone can choose for themselves, out of all of the options available to them, they may become overwhelmed by the possibilities. As Emmons (2005) notes, “although meaning is forged out of the many possibilities that life presents, these same choices can be experienced as paralyzing” (p. 738). He quotes Johnson (1959), in saying that “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… he is lured by the unknown, tempted by untasted possibilities… and driven forth to wrestle and sweat in a world of contradiction and uncertainty” (Emmons, 2005, p. 738).

Not only do such ideas reconnect with notions of coherence—that the world is ordered and sensible, that there is a broader plan or a purpose—but they also lend significance to one’s purpose. An individual may choose to be a doctor because they are fascinated by the human body and enjoy the fast-paced setting of hospitals, but they may not hold this purpose as centrally to their identity and life as someone who chooses to be a doctor because they believe God has tasked them with healing the sick. That is not to say that such comparisons are always or often the case; rather, it demonstrates a way in which a religious purpose could play a more integral, transcendental, and lasting role in an individual’s life.

Comprehensive and Unifying

A God-given purpose in life may also better maintain a sense of purpose in that it reduces the potential for conflicting or varied life goals. Much like perceived conflict within one’s meaning system, conflicting goals can lead to lower levels of wellbeing. Robert Emmons (1999) notes that, although “many aspects of goals facilitate subjective well-being, not all are beneficial. Conflicting aspirations are a major cause of suboptimal well-being and can lead to self-regulatory failure” (p. 9). If someone holds conflicting goals, they may not be able to progress in one without experiencing regression in the other. For example, someone may hold the goal of doing well in school, as well as the goal of being popular. While not necessarily inherently contradictory, one could imagine situations in which these goals would seem to conflict—indeed, such situations play out in popular media frequently. Suppose that someone has a term paper due
on the same night as an important fraternity party; this would force the individual to choose
between making progress on the goal of becoming popular through joining a fraternity, or doing
well in school by getting a good grade on a paper. In simply choosing how to spend their time,
students must decide whether they will invest in their schoolwork or in their friendships.

This kind of conflict, which Emmons (1999) characterizes as “the situation in which a
goal that person wishes to accomplish interferes with the attainment of at least one other goal
that the individual simultaneously wishes to accomplish” (p. 60), leads people to be unsure of
how to act. This uncertainty could lead to anxiety and uncertainty on its own, but is even more
distressing insofar as it threatens the attainment of at least one personal goal. As such, chronic
conflicts have been linked with multiple measures of distress and lower wellbeing, such as
anxiety, depression, tension, confusion, and uncertainty (Emmons, 1999). In fact, Emmons
(1999) has found that this aspect of goals, the perceived conflicts among them, has “the most
powerful influence on subjective well-being of any goal construct” (p. 60).

Therefore, an individual with a religious purpose may experience fewer conflicts among
their goals because, insofar as religions provide a comprehensive meaning system, one is less
likely to hold beliefs or goals that contradict each other. Research by Emmons (2005) has found
that spiritual goals tend to better predict wellbeing than non-spiritual goals, a finding that “may
be partially explained by the ability of religion to provide a unifying philosophy of life and to
serve as an integrating force” (p. 738). If someone’s goal is to be closer to God or live a
spiritually sanctified life, they can imbue many lower levels goals with this same unifying
purpose, such as being kind to others, praying daily, abstaining from certain foods, or becoming
a doctor in order to help heal the sick. In this way, religious purpose may be better able to
establish goals that pertain to many different aspects of their lives and avoid the potential for
conflict among these goals. Indeed, Emmons (2005) found some evidence that “the presence of theistic spiritual strivings in particular were related to low levels of inter-goal conflict, and to greater levels of goal integration. 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” (p. 738-739).

Of course, that is not to say that all religious individuals enjoy this sense of unity among their goals. It is very possible to imagine situations in which a religious individual could still experience such conflict. For example, young religious people may wish to abstain from sex until marriage in order to fulfill their purpose of pleasing God or living without sin. At the same time, outside pressures could influence the individual to engage in sexual activity in order to gain acceptance or popularity. The argument here is not that religious purpose is always better at sustaining and making progress towards one’s goals, just that the comprehensive nature of religious meaning systems would be more likely to foster unified and integrated goals stemming from an ultimate religious purpose.

*Flexibility: “If it’s meant to be, it’s meant to be”*

Another way in which this sense of a God-given purpose could better maintain a sense of purpose in life is that it is able to be molded to fit the events and course of someone’s life. It has already been noted that religious meaning systems can benefit an individual in that they are flexible. In the sense of coherence, this means that religion is able to make sense of randomness and to rebuild meaning when life events appear senseless. In the sense of purpose, religion can play a similar role.
While having purpose in life and lower-level goals that seek to meet this purpose often contributes to life satisfaction and feelings of meaning in life, there is a significant risk to one’s wellbeing should their purpose in life and their goals to meet it become unattainable. Take for example an individual who hopes to become a doctor and save lives. This noble purpose would be able to generate lower-level goals such as obtaining a residency, graduating from medical school, performing well on tests and maintaining good grades in school, or getting into college. However, the broader purpose of helping others and saving lives would be threatened should the individual fail to make adequate progress on their lower-level goals. Of course, this is why bad grades or college applications tend to instill so much anxiety and worry in students; they are seen to threaten deeper and more important goals. In this sense, as Wrosch et al. (2012) argue, “goal progress is functionally related to a person’s emotional experiences” (p. 541). Simply having a purpose is not enough to confer and maintain wellbeing; people must also feel that they are progressing towards their ultimate goals. I may be able to declare that my ultimate life goal is to travel the world, but without adequate funds to do so, and therefore with little likelihood that I could accomplish my goal, I would likely be upset and distressed, rather than uplifted, by this goal.

In this way, wellbeing is also a function of someone’s progress towards their goals, not merely their having them. At times, we can suffer small setbacks in our progress without losing our overall goal or our chances of obtaining it. In the example of a college student, a failed test or class may be distressing, but it might not mean that the individual’s entire life goal is out of reach. They may respond to such events by spending more time studying and preparing for the next test, or by retaking a class and investing more effort in it than before. Should their efforts
pay off, they would be able to continue making progress towards their goal, and their overall wellbeing, as related to their life goals, would be maintained. As Wrosch et al. (2012) note, this response occurs if the person’s expectations for goal attainment remain sufficiently positive. Continued effort can, in this case, promote positive outcomes if the opportunities for future goal attainment are favorable. In fact, in many situations people can overcome goal failure if they invest more effort, strengthen their psychological commitment toward, or find an alternative path to realize the threatened goal. (p. 541-542)

However, not all setbacks can be met with such renewed effort and hope for future progress. At times, certain goals, and certain life purposes, can become completely unattainable. If the individual hoping to become a doctor repeatedly fails their classes and cannot get into medical school, they may realize that their long term goal is simply unattainable.

Goals may become unattainable for many reasons. Winning an Olympic medal is simply not possible for people not born with the necessary athletic skill, funding graduate school or career advancements may become impossible if someone has a child and must spend their time and money on them instead, and even age-related declines can make goals that were once attainable become impossible to meet. Such situations are quite common. In fact, Wrosch et al. (2012) have found that “people confront on average one valued but unattainable goal each year” and as such, “unattainable goals are a common and therefore important psychological phenomenon” (p. 542). Holding on to unattainable goals can, as the authors note, “create a crisis for a person’s sense of meaning because the desired goal outcome related to the person’s overall sense of self or identity is no longer attainable” (Wrosch et al., 2012, p. 543). What’s important to note is that how one responds to an unattainable goal has a great deal of impact on their overall sense of wellbeing. It may seem that the distress caused by an individual’s realizing that they can never reach their goal is unavoidable and lasting; however, Wrosch et al. argue that, in fact, “people can thrive in circumstances where valued goals have become unattainable if they
are able to adjust their goals” (p. 543). This goal adjustment, they argue, plays an integral role in individual’s emotional wellbeing.

On the authors’ conception, goal adjustment involves two processes: disengaging from the unattainable goal (i.e., withdrawing their effort and commitment to the goal), and reengaging their goal-directed efforts somewhere else (i.e., identifying, committing to, and investing effort in pursuing an alternative meaningful goal). When individuals are able to successfully disengage and then reengage their goal efforts, they are able to remedy the distress caused by failing to reach or make progress on their life goals. As Wrosch et al. note, “these processes of adaptive goal adjustment keep a person engaged in the pursuit of meaningful and attainable goals” (p. 542). As such, individuals who are better able to successfully adjust their goals and purpose experience greater subjective wellbeing than those who do not.

A number of studies underscore the importance of goal adjustment on wellbeing. A study by Heckhausen, Wrosch, and Fleeson (2001) demonstrated that women who failed to disengage from the goal of having their own children after their biological clock had run out reported “particularly high levels of depressive symptomology,” over women who had disengaged from that goal (as cited in Wrosch et al., 2012, p. 544). Similarly, a 1993 study conducted by Tunali and Power (as cited in Wrosch et al., 2012), found that mothers of autistic children tended to “downgrade the importance of career success in defining their life satisfaction and upgrade the importance of being a good parent in comparison with mothers who did no have an autistic child” (p. 544). More importantly, the higher the women rated the importance of being a successful parent, the higher their life satisfaction was, indicating that they had more successfully devoted themselves to the new goal of being a good parent in light of their situation, and that this had a beneficial effect on their wellbeing. Indeed, in a similar study conducted on
parents of children with cancer, “those parents of children with cancer who were better able to adjust to unattainable goals, depression scores were almost as low as the scores of parents of healthy children” (Wrosch et al., 2012, p. 547).

The authors themselves conducted a study which examined goal disengagement and reengagement among undergraduate students making the transition to college. They found that the capacity to withdraw effort and commitment from unattainable goals was related to lower levels of perceived stress and intrusive thoughts and to high levels of self-mastery. In addition, students who were able to reengage in alternative goals reported lower levels of perceived stress and intrusive thoughts as well as higher levels of purpose in life and self-mastery. (Wrosch et al., 2012, p. 546)

Another study by the authors measured associations between goal adjustment tendencies and purpose among older adults, and found that “adaptive levels of both goal disengagement and goal reengagement tendencies were associated with higher levels of purpose” (Wrosch et al., 2012, p. 548). In summarizing the literature on goal disengagement and reengagement, Wrosch et al. (2012) conclude that “research on goal adjustment and indicators of subjective well-being has demonstrated in cross-sectional, quasi-experimental, and longitudinal studies that adaptive levels of goal adjustment tendencies can be associated with high levels of subjective well-being” (p. 549).

Furthermore, the studies reviewed by Wrosch et al. have found that goal disengagement and goal reengagement can be seen as separate but related processes, with different effects on wellbeing. In the case of the authors’ study of undergraduates transitioning to college, it was found that, although experiencing a difficulty in disengaging with an unattainable goal was related to lower levels of wellbeing, their wellbeing was also related to their ability to reengage. They found that, among individuals who had difficulty disengaging, “those individuals with a higher capacity to reengage reported greater self-mastery and less perceived stress than did those less able to reengage,” suggesting that “goal reengagement can buffer the negative effects of
inability to disengage on subjective well-being” (p. 547). Overall, they find that “goal
disengagement tendencies often show a stronger effect on negative indicators of subjective well-
being (e.g. low negative affect or low depression), whereas goal reengagement tendencies seem
to be more closely related to positive indicators of subjective well-being (e.g. positive affect or
purpose in life)” (p. 549-550). The authors further note that such results are unsurprising in their
conceptualization of disengagement as an important process in dealing with the emotional
distress evoked by an unattainable goal, and reengagement as important in providing a sense of
purpose.

With such an understanding of goal adjustment, one can understand how the flexibility of
religious meaning systems may be able to maintain a sense of purpose in that it can better
encourage disengaging from one goal and reengaging with another. To explain how, I will
borrow an example from Kenneth Pargament (1997). Pargament describes a patient, Kathy, who
once believed that her purpose was to become a social worker and help the needy through this
career. After a terrible accident, however, Kathy is left unable to pursue this goal because of
physical and financial limitations. Distressed by this, she reaches out to God while she is still in
the hospital and recalls Him telling her not to worry, and that her purpose right then is only to get
better. Satisfied that God is still looking out for her and her wellbeing, she focuses only on
getting better. After she has recovered from the initial physical trauma, Kathy then hears God tell
her that her purpose in life is to be an advocate for others in her situation. She is then able to
direct her efforts towards becoming a volunteer and disability services advocate, and still feels as
though this is her true and lasting purpose in life. In this way, Kathy’s religious meaning system
was flexible in that it allowed her to make sense of why this traumatic accident had happened to
her, and shift her purpose in life in response to it. Rather than being a distressing roadblock in the
path towards her purpose, Kathy’s religious meaning system was able to resituate her accident as part of a broader plan, facilitating her goal readjustment.

As Pargament describes, since religious purpose is constructed by God for the individual, instead of chosen by them, religious individuals can reengage with new goals when old ones become unattainable because they simply need to rediscover the purpose God means for them: “when old purposes are no longer viable, the individual does not have to create a new reason for living—the work in coping is to discern the transcendental design” (Pargament, 1997, p. 237). In seeking to discover their unique, predetermined purpose in life, religious individuals are set up to view setbacks and unattainable goals as signs that they have not found the right path, and not as indications that they have failed their goals. Therefore, religious individuals can better maintain a sense of purpose in the face of unattainable goals as they can better reengage with meaningful goals.

Of course, not all religious purpose confers wellbeing in this way. For example, if an individual is less flexibly oriented towards their religion, or takes a more literal stance, they may believe that there is truly a single purpose God has for them, and that, if they find themselves unable to fulfill that particular purpose, they may have failed Him. In some traditions, women are seen as mothers first and foremost, and find their purpose in having large families. If a woman who belongs to such a tradition finds that she is unable to conceive, one could understand how this might be framed in her mind as a failure to achieve God’s will and would likely lead to more distress. If she is unable to shift to a slightly different understanding or interpretation of what God’s will is for her, then she may feel unable to fulfill her purpose in life. If, however, she were able to reconstruct her purpose by, for example, adopting children, or becoming involved with orphanages and foster homes, she may be able to maintain the original purpose in a different
way. Whether or not she is able to do so would depend on her own unique orientation to her religion and to her beliefs about God. This idea that religion may serve as an advantage in that it can be molded to accommodate life events, then, is in line with the findings that more fundamentalist, orthodox, and inflexible religions and religious orientations are actually related to lower levels of wellbeing (e.g., Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). It is not religion itself or religion everywhere that is able to confer and maintain a sense of purpose, it is instead a particular orientation towards religion and religious purposes that are better suited to confer wellbeing.
Chapter Four:

Significance

My question—that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide—was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man from the foolish child to the wisest elder... It was: “What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow?—What will come of my whole life?... Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?... Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?”


Tolstoy’s question is evocative of a perennial human anxiety. In the face of tragedy and destruction, in the context of the impossibly vast universe, and with the awareness of our own mortality, humanity yearns to understand why our lives are worth living, and why we matter at all. The philosopher Albert Camus has argued that “judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (Camus, 1955, p. 94, as cited in Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 535-536). Throughout human history, questions of what our lives are worth, what our place is within a broader cosmology, and what makes life worth living have pervaded philosophy, religion, and everyday life.

Indeed, as George and Park (2016) note “many existential realities of human life seem capable of suggesting to us that our lives do not matter in any grand scheme and that the universe is indifferent to our existence” (p. 212) For example,

the universe existed long before us and will exist long after us; our actions and our existence appear spatially and temporally constrained to an incredibly minuscule part of an incredibly large world; myself and the other 8 billion people on the planet will die
within the next century and will be replaced by another 8 billion or more; the people closest to us die, and the world goes on completely unconcerned; people seem to die or get gravely injured with no apparent justification for their misfortune… (George & Park, 2016, p. 212-213).

The tertiary component of meaning in life, significance, is in many ways a response to these fundamental human anxieties. To have a sense of significance is to feel that, in spite of such existential realities, our lives do matter.

Significance, then, “focuses on value, worth, and importance” and is defined as “a valu-laden evaluation of one’s life as a whole regarding how important, worthwhile, and inherently valuable it feels” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 535). On George and Park’s (2016) similar tripartite conception, the term “mattering” is used to refer to “the degree to which individuals feel that their existence is of significance, importance, and value in the world” (p. 212).14

As has been noted, the literature on meaning in life is diverse, and lacking in common theoretical frameworks or specific operationalizations of different terms.15 This issue is perhaps most evident with the notion of significance. While a brief scan through the indices of several books on meaning (e.g., Wong, 2012; Lopez & Snyder, 2009) will yield references to “meaning,” “purpose,” or “coherence,” they do not reference the term “significance” or, to use George and Park’s (2014, 2016) term, “mattering.”16 Although feelings of worth, value, and importance are frequently cited in conceptions of meaning in life, these components are often left more opaque and undefined than coherence or purpose, or are not differentiated from them.

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14 For the sake of clarity, I will be using the term “significance” to denote the tertiary component of meaning in life, and will assume that the sense of this term is similar enough to George and Park’s “mattering” that they can said to be describing the same concept. Therefore, I will use “significance” when discussing the work of George and Park, even though they themselves do not use this term, with the exception being the use of direct quotations. In these cases, the terms “mattering” or “Existential Mattering” [EM] should be understood as identical to “significance.”

15 For example, some scholars differentiate only between “meaning” and “purpose,” where meaning is used in a sense analogous to the use of “coherence” in this work (e.g., Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Reker, 1992).

16 This is with the exception of one reference to “significance” in the index of the Oxford Handbook, but here the term is used to refer to what this work refers to as “coherence.”
Indeed, all the authors which inform my discussion here note that this aspect has received the least empirical attention of the three constructs, and therefore requires slightly more speculation than the others (e.g., George & Park, 2016; George & Park, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016).

This is not to say that significance is not a valid and important component of meaning in life. Indeed, the opening paragraph reveals the importance of such a concept; the question of the value of life, the worth of living, is often expressed, as in Tolstoy’s quote, as an issue of meaning. Martela and Steger (2016) cite the philosopher Thomas Nagel (2000) as casting “the meaning of life in terms of whether one’s life matters or not in the larger scale” and note that “in fact, this seems to be the way the question of meaning is usually conceptualized in philosophy” (p. 536). However, this aspect of meaning in life, this “quality of being of value” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 542), is not accounted for in the conceptualizations of coherence or purpose. Although making sense of life and finding valuable goals to motivate our actions might engender a sense of our lives as valuable, we can and do find value and worth in our lives in other ways. In this way, the concept of significance is valuable: “it serves to specifically focus attention on the human inclination to feel that one’s existence is of significance and relevance without conflating it with other related constructs or aspects of meaning” (George & Park, 2014, p. 40).

As argued in the title of George and Park’s (2014) article, significance is “a neglected but central aspect of meaning.” The authors note that the concept “is implicitly and frequently a part of many scholarly works within the meaning literature” (p. 39), and should therefore be discussed as an explicit and distinct component of meaning in life. In defense of this, George and Park (2014) cite several historical conceptions of meaning in life that allude to just such a concept. One of the most famous psychologists in this area, Viktor Frankl, describes an “existential frustration” that leads one to question the worthwhileness of life (Frankl, 1959/2000,
as cited in George & Park, 2014). Similarly, the psychologist Roy F. Baumeister argues that people are loath to think that their lives are no more meaningful than the life of an insect… Interest in the deeper mysteries of life may simply reflect the idle hope that all of this has some profound, lasting importance—the hope that it can be understood and, what’s more, that it is worth taking the trouble to figure it out. (Baumeister 1991, p. 61, as cited in George & Park, 2014, p. 42).

Additionally, Ernest Becker believed that the essential dilemma of human existence stems from the fact that a person is a “mortal animal who at the same time is conscious of his mortality” (Becker 1973/1997, p. 268, as cited in George and Park, 2014, p. 42), and that because of our mortal condition, “humans ache for ‘cosmic specialness,’ the feeling that they are of primary value in the world… that there is some value to our lives in the universe; that we are not just another living organism and that our existence means something more” (p. 42).

Essentially, significance is the attempt to answer what Becker and others (e.g., George & Park, 2014; 2016, Martela & Steger, 2016) believe to be a fundamental human existential question: if my life is so short in the context of the vast and timeless universe, if am I the same mortal material as that of insects and animals, if the world will continue indefinitely after and without regard for my death, and if living frequently requires suffering and pain, what is the point of my life? In the face of these realities, why should I assume my life to matter, and why should I continue living at all? In this sense, significance refers to an abstract evaluation of the worthwhileness of one’s life. It refers not only to “a sense of personal worth in the context of a broader cosmology” (Sullivan, Kosloff, & Greenberg, 2013, p. 21, as cited in Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 535), but also to finding the world “worthy enough to live in” (Shmotkin & Shrira, 2012, p. 146, cited in Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 535)—to life being valuable enough that we should continue to live it.
Of course, this oldest of human dilemmas, this fundamental question for philosophers, is not something that George, Park, Martela, or Steger take themselves to be answering. Indeed, in the passage from George and Park (2016) cited above, the authors note that “existential realities” seem to conclude that human lives don’t matter. The issue for psychologists is not to defend the fact that our lives matter. In spite of these realities, people nevertheless come to feel that they do matter; psychologists seek to understand how and why this happens, and what consequences it has for individuals’ health and wellbeing.

Sources of Significance

Cultural Worldviews, Values, and Purpose

In this sense, how people find a sense of significance is an important component of any discussion of significance. According to the literature reviewed by George and Park (2014), one source of significance comes from cultural worldviews and values. Roy F. Baumeister has argued that humans have a need for a “myth of higher meaning,” for a “higher level story or grand theme” in which individuals can situate their lives. He argues that “a person wants his or her life to make an interesting or inspiring story, to exemplify a high theme or lesson, or to be part of grand and important developments” (Baumeister 1991, p. 61, as cited in George & Park, 2014, p. 42). Similarly, Ernest Becker has argued that humanity addresses our need for “cosmic specialness”—a term analogous to significance in the sense of one's life mattering or being of value to a broader cosmology—through culturally prescribed roles, standards, and values.

Humans earn

a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning… by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society
are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. (Becker 1973/1997, p. 5, as cited in George & Park, 2014, p. 42).

In this sense, cultural mythologies that place human lives in the context of higher, grander stories, whether they be of a religious or secular nature, confer a sense of value and significance. They orient the individual to something larger and more important than themselves, and suggest that they have an impact or value that will outlive their mortal lives.

In many ways, then, a sense of significance may arise from a sense of purpose. As Becker notes, goals of building physical works that will outlive the builder’s life, or of creating large families that extend an individual through time can offer this sense of “cosmic specialness.” Similarly, one could imagine that the sense of purpose that might stem from being a doctor could confer a sense of significance; not only does this purpose motivate the individual and structure smaller goals, but it also orients them to something larger and longer lasting than themselves. Helping to save a dying child will leave a valuable impact on the child’s life long after the doctor has passed on. Hoping to heal many people, and practicing this through medicine, has an impact on the larger society as a whole. Being “useful” to others, to the world, offers a sense of importance and value as a part of something bigger than the individual, as something that will outlast their mortal life.

That is not to say, however, that a sense of purpose and a sense of significance are one in the same, although they may be seen to be closely related. As Martela and Steger (2016) note, “someone who finds life to be empty and worthless can draw inspiration from the impact they can make by pursuing a purpose” (p. 537). However, significance and purpose differ in some essential ways. As Martela and Steger (2016) argue, significance is about finding value in life, while purpose is about finding valuable goals—a slight but distinct difference. Significance relates to our lives as a whole, to past, present, and future, while purpose “is distinctly future-
oriented: it is about evaluating the potential future value of one’s life through sustained goals that give life direction and momentum” (p. 537). Having a purpose can lead to, and in this way, be a source of feelings of significance, but a sense of significance is not the same as a sense of purpose.

Moreover, a sense of significance does not depend on purpose. As Martela and Steger (2016) describe,

when we evaluate our lives as a whole to establish how valuable and worth living they are, we most probably draw from many sources. Having worthwhile goals in the future and having achieved some goals in the past most probably play a major role in this evaluation… purpose as a future-oriented goal can lend significance to the present moment. But there is no reason to believe that these are the only factors that we use in making this evaluation. (p. 537, emphasis in original).

We may feel that our lives are valuable and worthwhile, without attaching that value to specific goals or purposes. To paraphrase a 2017 TEDx Talk from Frank Martela, purpose may be a strong factor in the evaluation that our life is significant, but at the same time, many of our lives’ most meaningful moments occur when we are in the present moment, and not thinking about any future goals (TEDx Talks, 2017).

As described above, culturally prescribed standards and values can imbue lives with a sense of significance. Living well, responsibly, or with compassion may be standards or values that cultural worldviews prescribe—indeed, most major religions teach that we should love one another and treat others as we would want to be treated. These teachings, and other worldviews, “provide standards for what makes an individual a person of value in the world” (George & Park, 2016, p. 213). Even if a woman becomes a doctor because this long term purpose in her life will imbue it with a sense of significance, she may also work to exemplify values of compassion or forgiveness without relating these to her sense of purpose, by for example, donating to charity or practicing kindness in her daily life. Her cultural worldview teaches that practicing these values,
living up to these standards, is what makes her life valuable, even when this value is not attached to her sense of purpose. Insofar as an individual feels that they exemplify a valuable life, the kind of life or practices that their culture imbues with value, they may feel a sense of significance and worth.

Connecting to Others

Besides purposes and values, a sense of significance often arises from our relationships to and sense of belonging with those around us. Not only do the values and cultural mythologies that give people a sense of significance have a direct relation to connecting with others—they teach values and stories that emphasize the importance of relationships with others, such as compassion and forgiveness, or valorize those who do good for others—but lives can find significance through family relationships and connecting with others. Indeed, the quote from Becker (1973/1997) above notes that starting a family which spans generations can imbue our lives with significance and make our life valuable even after our death. Likewise, Robert Lifton, in studies of symbolic and literal immortality, argues that “close relationships offer a symbolic promise of lastingness and continuity that provide individuals with a sense of symbolic immortality” (Lifton, 1979, as cited in Lambert et al., 2013, p. 1419). The effects we have on others, and our relationships to them, make our lives worth living, and make our lives matter in the context of something greater than ourselves.

Indeed, although rarely discussed using the term “significance” as a distinct component of meaning in life, a sense of belonging and social factors often play heavily into an individual’s notions of a meaningful life. For one, relationships and people are frequently regarded as a source of meaning in people’s lives. For example, Martela and Steger (2016) cite a study by
Lambert et al. (2010) that used an open-ended question to ask participants to pick one thing that made their lives feel most meaningful. In response, 68% of participants mentioned family or specific family members, leading Martela and Steger to conclude that one’s relationship with family “might make our lives feel filled with value and significance” (p. 537). Similarly, when Michael F. Steger asked his students to document what made their lives meaningful, almost 90% responded with some form of relationship—family, friends, significant others, etc—and many noted that “connecting with family, connecting with heritage and tradition” led them to feel a sense of meaning in life (TEDx Talks, 2013).

Elsewhere, Steger (2009) describes research that seeks to understand where people gain a sense of meaning from, which is often done through posing open-ended questions such as “What gives your life meaning?” or by providing a set of possible answers to this question and ask participants to rate how important each source is to them. In both of these methods, most people report that relationships with others are the most important source of meaning in their lives (Steger, 2009, p. 683). Other researchers have shown that social exclusion leads people to regard life as less meaningful than control groups who were not experimentally induced to feel excluded (Baumeister & MacKenzie, 2011).

The connections between notions of belonging, social support, social value, or self-esteem, and meaning in life are widely recognized (e.g. Moynihan, Igou, & van Tilburg, 2017; Aron & Aron, 2012; Lambert et al., 2013). Indeed one of the foremost scholars on meaning in life, Roy, F. Baumeister, includes “self-worth” as one of four “needs for meaning” (Tomer, 2012). Lambert et al. (2013) conducted four separate studies, correlational, longitudinal, and experimental in design, all of which found that a sense of belonging was associated with or led to
a higher sense of meaning in life, leading the authors to conclude that “satiating one’s need to belong appears to be important for feeling that life is worthwhile and meaningful” (p. 1420).

Of course, these studies show that social factors are important for a sense of meaning in life, and do not directly measure social factors as they relate to a sense of *significance*. As noted above, theoretical and empirical research on meaning in life often implies significance, but does not directly measure it or differentiate it from a general measure of “meaning in life.” Therefore, though we lack data relating the specific subconstruct *significance* to notions of belonging, social support, or self-esteem, the pervasiveness with which social factors relate to meaning in life demonstrate a need to account for the sociality of meaning in our tripartite conception of meaning in life.

Furthermore, it seems that significance may be an appropriate construct in which to place the social factors that contribute to a sense of meaning in life. For one thing, belonging, positive relationships, and social support do not seem to be accounted for in the notions of coherence or purpose—although we may have goals of bettering our relationships with others, we may also obtain a sense of meaning in life from our relationships and social communities without these being tied to a sense of purpose. Spending time with family and friends lends significance to our present moment, without regard to our future goals.

More importantly, questions of our value and worth—that is, questions related directly to the notion of significance—are often informed by social factors. A sense of belonging “is among the most centrally important human motivations in the sense that our self-worth is heavily dependent on it” (Aron & Aron, 2012). Similarly, Nielson, Hatton, and Donahue (2013) note that people “seek meaning about their place in the social world through connections to others and social roles… [they] validate [their] worth by means of social comparison processes and social
judgements” (p. 315). As described above, the idea that human beings have a fundamental “need to belong” is common in psychological theories, and this kind of “group inclusion represents a central source of self-esteem” (Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 260). Not only is meaning fundamentally social, but our sense of worth, value, and self-esteem, aspects of significance itself, are inextricably tied to society and our relationship with others.

This is why, it seems, Martela and Steger (2016) argue that significance may arise from feeling as though one is treated fairly by others, from having a sense of self-esteem, or from positive relationships. We can come to feel that our lives matter and are of value because other people value us, because our society values us, and because we matter to each other. Indeed, in his 2017 TEDx Talk, which focuses explicitly on significance as opposed to coherence or purpose, Frank Martela summarizes his research findings of what makes people feel that their lives are valuable, worthwhile, and significant by saying that “meaning in life is about making yourself meaningful to other people.” He continues by saying that this kind of meaningfulness to others stems from two pathways: from our contributions and from our sense of relatedness. It is not just our contributions to society or to others, through goals and values, that bolster our sense of significance, but also a sense of relatedness and belongingness with our close friends, family, and societies.

Finally, Martela and Steger (2016) offer an interesting source of data further links significance with belongingness and social factors: psychological research on suicide. Suicide could, in some ways, be seen to represent the antithesis of significance—indeed, the question posed by Tolstoy and philosophers throughout history is that of why we should live. In defining what significance is, George and Park (2016) note that “to experience a low sense of mattering [e.g. significance] is to feel that one’s existence carries little significance and that one’s
nonexistence would make no impact on the world” (p. 212). People who attempt to commit suicide are, in some cases, examples of those who have determined that life is not worth living or that their lives do not matter. In this way, research on suicide may provide a way to gather data on what makes life worth living, and what factors seem to lead people to believe that their lives are not worth living.

In this research on suicide, belongingness and social support appear to play an important role. Koenig, King, and Carson (2012) note that much research supports the idea that “higher levels of social integration (including friendship network and family integration) would result in lower suicide rates” (p. 176). Indeed, suicide attempts or completed suicides are commonly associated with psychological disorders such as depression (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). In turn, low self-worth is so widely understood as detrimental to wellbeing as to be a diagnostic marker for several psychological disorders, including depression (Steger, 2012a). In this way, low self-worth, loneliness, and a lack of social integration may facilitate the sense that life is not worth living and that the individual’s life does not matter.

In sum, significance is the notion that our lives matter in terms of something greater than ourselves, whether that be a grand cultural narrative or our broader community, and that our life is worth living. The ways in which we find significance in life come from connecting to something outside of ourselves, whether that be through having a positive impact on society through our goals, living well according to cultural values, or fostering our relationships with others and with our community. As of yet, empirical and theoretical discussions of significance remain muddled in the murky, undifferentiated, or differently operationalized conceptions of meaning in life. This remains a real issue at the heart of meaning in life scholarship. Nevertheless, the importance of finding value and worth in our lives, and the idea that such
factors stem substantially from our relationship with and contributions to others and to society are implicit in much of this literature. Future research should work to disentangle such notions from other uses of the term “meaning,” and to provide common and empirically validated notions of significance as it relates to and is distinct from meaning, coherence, and purpose.

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Religion as Significance

Religion is a paradigmatic source of significance in a number of ways. As we have seen, exemplifying culturally prescribed roles, standards, and values; being a part of a larger story or important cultural development; and social support or belonging are important sources of significance. In many ways, values, relationships, and being a part of something important and larger than oneself make up the heart of religiosity.

Religious Worldviews and Values

Supernatural mythologies teach religious adherents that their lives are part of something larger. Many religions teach that individuals play an important role in God’s unfolding plan, that an individual is part of a greater, sacred reality, and that an individual’s life matters because it extends beyond the mortal realm, into the afterlife or future lives. In search of a “cosmic specialness,” religious worldviews that attest to the specialness of the individual in the eyes of the creator of the cosmos can be an obvious source of significance.

17 As goals and purpose in relation to religion and wellbeing have already been discussed in the preceding chapter, there is no need for me to reiterate religion’s relationship with purpose in the context of purpose being a source of significance. The remainder of this chapter, while acknowledging the role of purpose and goals as sources of significance, will focus solely on significance as arising from other sources, such as cultural worldviews, values, and social factors.
Perhaps more integrally, religion places an enormous emphasis on values and morality. Religious mythology not only puts humanity within the context of something greater, but it also serves to instill certain values and moral codes. The Ten Commandments, the Eightfold Path, and other religious codes teach adherents how to live a valuable life, and what actions or values are to be praised or punished. As Saroglou, Delpierre, and Dernelle (2004) note, “values and religiosity are perceived to be considerably related to each other… religion emphasizes the importance of some specific values while downplaying the importance of some others” (p. 721). Religious figures such as Gandhi and Mother Theresa are valorized precisely because they exemplify important religious ideals and values. Religion not only provides individuals with explicit values, but also imbues them with an ultimate authority, and encourages adherents to live up to these standards in order to please deities and/or secure immortality.

Indeed, the notion that one cannot have values without religion is pervasive, and a common rebuttal leveled against atheists and agnostics. The theologian William Lane Craig, among others, has argued that “on a naturalistic worldview, everything is ultimately destined to destruction in the heat death of the universe… In light of that end, it's hard for me to understand how our moral choices have any sort of significance… The universe is neither better nor worse for what we do. Our moral lives become vacuous because they don't have that kind of cosmic significance” (as cited in Shermer, 2018). Here, Craig voices a common concern that without religion, on a solely scientific worldview, there is nothing significant about human lives, no true morality, and no need to practice morality or adhere to certain values. Regardless of the validity of this view—many atheists, agnostics, and others mount a defense against this idea (e.g. Harris, 2010)—it appears time and again in discussions of religion and science, and in religious attacks against atheists. The relation between religion and values, and between religion and mattering to
something greater, is generally understood. Insofar as a sense of significance arises from cultural worldviews that place our human lives in the context of something greater, and offer and encourage the adherence to particular values, religion can be understood as a paramount source of significance in people’s lives.

*Religious Belongingness, Sociality, and Self-Worth*

Furthermore, religion also confers a multitude of social factors that can further this sense of significance. Indeed, the notion that social life is at the heart of religiosity is common throughout religious studies (e.g. Durkheim, 1912/1995, Berger, 1967). Even the burgeoning evolutionary psychological theories of religion underscore the centrality of social factors in religious practice and beliefs (e.g. Norenzayan, 2013). As Kim-Prieto (2014) describes, “organized communal worship, as well as fellowship with other adherents of the religious tradition, help define what it means to be an adherent of that religion” (p. 6). Similarly, Lee Kirkpatrick (2005) cites multiple scholars who note “the centrality of relationship themes in religious life,” (p. 53). These include Greeley’s (1981) observation that “just as the story of anyone’s life’s the story of relationships—so each person’s religious story is the a story of relationships” (p. 18, as cited in Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 53), and Stark’s (1965) argument that religious experience can be seen as an interaction involving “the divinity and the individual as a pair of actors involved in a social encounter” (p. 99, as cited in Kirkpatrick, 2005, p 54). Indeed, the very language of religion seems to betray the centrality of relationships. Christian doctrine frequently uses familial relationship terms, as when it refers to God as “the Father” and Jesus as “the Son,” and religious clergy members are often given similar patriarchal monikers. What this underscores, and as Kirkpatrick (2005) notes, is that “the relationship conceptualization of
religion is not just a theoretical invention by academic scholars; it is clearly understood and articulated by believers themselves” (p. 54). As social relationships, social support, and a sense of belonging can be important sources of a sense of our lives as valuable and worthwhile, the emphasis on sociality and community by many if not all religions offers another way that religious meaning systems can confer a sense of significance.

It is no surprise, therefore, that religion’s effects on wellbeing is often attributed to its ability to confer social support, self-worth, and belongingness. Many scholars argue that religion’s benefits to wellbeing and mental health come, at least in part, from the provision of a socially supportive community (e.g., Krause, 2008; Krause, 2009; Lim & Putnam, 2010; Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). As Baumeister and MacKenzie (2011) note, “some of the appeal of religion is almost certainly based on its provision of a sense of belonging to an extended family, headed by a god who is regarded as an exalted father figure” (p. 218-219).

In their massive review of studies concerning religion and spirituality, Koenig, King, and Carson (2012) found that at least 74 studies have examined the relationship between “R/S” (religion/spirituality) and social support. Of these, 82% (61 studies) reported significant positive associations, and of the 29 studies they reviewed as having a quality rating of 7 or higher, 93% (27 studies) reported positive associations between religion and social support. Even within prospective or longitudinal studies, which are better able to establish pathways of causality than cross-sectional studies, five out of seven studies, including one with a 28-year follow up, found that higher religiosity levels at baseline predicted increased social support over time. In light of the majority of these studies reporting significant links between religiosity and social support, the authors contend that “it is safe to conclude that the two are related” (p. 303). Relatedly, the
authors reviewed 17 studies exploring the relationship between R/S and loneliness, 53% (9 studies) of which found less loneliness among those who are more religious.

Not only might feelings of significance come from belonging to a religious community, but significance is also related, as has been discussed, to self-esteem and self-worth. Again, many studies find a similar relation between religion and self-esteem as they do religion and social support. As Lim and Putnam (2010) note, “studies also suggest that strong religious faith and personal spiritual experiences can improve well-being by bolstering self-esteem and self-efficacy” (p. 917). In Koenig, King, and Carson’s (2012) review, in which they describe self-esteem as “reflect[ing] a person’s overall evaluation of his or her own worth and involves both belief and emotion” (p. 303), 61% (42 of 69 total studies) reported a significant positive association between R/S and self-esteem. Of the 25 studies they gave a quality rating of 7 or higher to, 68% (17 studies) found a positive link. This may in fact be unsurprising, as Lee Kirkpatrick (2005) notes that some psychologists argue that “group memberships, such as national and ethnic identities, are central to individuals’ (‘social’ or ‘collective’) self-esteem” (p. 259). In this way, the social support provided by religion may have a direct impact on individual’s wellbeing. Furthermore, to the extent that significance can arise from close relationships, social support, a sense of belonging, and self-worth or self-esteem, religion’s beneficial effects on wellbeing may be said to stem in part from religion’s ability to confer a sense of significance through religious community and the fostering of close relationships and self-worth.
The Uniqueness of Religious Significance

Of course, religion is far from the only source of cultural values or supportive communities and a sense of belonging. As mentioned above, a number of secular authors and scholars have described the ways in which values and morality can stem from sources other than religion, and how religion is not necessary for our lives to matter (e.g. Harris, 2010; Shermer, 2018). Furthermore, a socially supportive community is of course not found in religion alone. Emotional support is provided by friends and family, and many people belong to organizations, sports teams, or other recreational or professional groups that can provide a similar sense of belonging. Indeed, research conducted in secular settings have similarly found that “emotional support from family members and close friends is associated with a greater sense of meaning in life… [and] makes people feel valued and esteemed” (Krause, 2008, p. 398). Nevertheless, there are several important ways in which religion can be seen as particularly and uniquely good at prescribing values that instill a sense of significance, and at conferring and maintaining a sense of belonging to a community, and a feeling as though one is valued and important.

Unique Encouragement of Prosocial Values

Significance, as an evaluation of one’s life, would seem to require a standard against which to evaluate. As described above, cultural worldviews prescribe certain values that describe what a valuable, worthy life is, and confer a sense of significance insofar as individual’s live up to them. Religions not only paradigmatically offer such moral and value standards, but it often prescribes values that further enhance wellbeing, that are encouraged with eternal and dramatic consequences, and that are reinforced through frequent reminders of those values and their importance.
Religions often prescribe values that are prosocial in nature. That is, they encourage behavior and values that are altruistic and promote social solidarity. As Krause (2008) notes, religious principles tend to “encourage the faithful to love one another, care for those who are in need, avoid being judgmental, and forgive those who have done something wrong” (p. 401). In turn, these values are known, on their own, to instill wellbeing and a sense of significance. Research from Mongrain, Chin, and Shapira (2011) found that when participants practiced compassion and caring for another person on a daily basis for one week, compared to participants who wrote about an early memory every day for one week, those who practiced compassion experienced higher levels of happiness and self-esteem at a six month follow up than did those who wrote about an early memory. As the authors describe,

a converging body of literature suggests that various forms of compassionate behaviors have immediate and long-term psychological health benefits for the individuals who exhibit them, including positive mood states (Millar et al., 1988), reduced depressive symptoms (Krause et al., 1992; Taylor and Turner, 2001), and increased self-esteem (Krause and Shaw, 2000; Yogev and Ronen, 1982). (p. 964).

What’s more, some evidence appears to show that practicing compassion towards others actually produces more wellbeing benefits than being the receiver of compassionate acts. A study conducted by Schwartz et al. (2003) found that “being the provider of altruistic behaviors was associated with greater gains in mental health (i.e. lowered depression and anxiety) than being the recipient of altruistic behaviors” (as cited in Mongrain, Chin, & Shapira, 2011, p. 964).

Along with compassion and kindness, prototypical religious virtues such as forgiveness have recently been found to have a positive association with wellbeing. Yalçın and Malkoç (2014) found that forgiveness and hope may mediate the relationship between subjective well-being and meaning in life. In their literature review, they note that “empirical studies indicate a significant relationship between forgiveness and well-being (Allemand et al. 2012; Chan 2013),”
(p. 918) and that more forgiving people tend to have higher subjective and psychological wellbeing (e.g. Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006, as cited in Yalçin & Malkoç, 2014). In this way, religious values not only provide a standard that individuals seek to live up to, and therefore, find a sense of significance through, but the kinds of values religions prescribe may also be those that further contribute to psychological wellbeing. Likewise, if social connectedness also enhances a sense of significance, it may be telling that the kinds of values religion prescribes also tend to be those that enhance social relationships.

Furthermore, religion may be capable of not only conferring values that can lend significance to individual’s lives, and enhance well-being on their own, but religious practices offer a unique way to maintain and encourage these values. Ara Norenzyan (2013) makes the compelling case that religions with powerful, morally concerned gods are especially good at encouraging cooperation and prosocial values (at least, to members of an individual’s community). One reason he offers is summed up in his principle that “religion is more in the situation than in the person.” That is, religious values may encourage prosociality, but these values are instilled not simply as a result of one’s being affiliated with religion, but because religious people are frequently reminded of the importance of these values and the need to practice them. Norenzayan describes “the Sunday Effect” which is the tendency for Christians to be more charitable on Sundays—presumably because the religious priming of going to church reminds individuals that God is watching. As one study showed, “on Sundays, appeals to charity were over 300 percent more effective for religious Christian individuals compared to nonreligious individuals” even though “on any other days of the week, religious and nonreligious individuals were absolutely no different” in their charitable giving (Norenzayan, 2013, p. 37). It
is not that religious people are just nicer and more charitable in general, but that their religious practices and communities reinforce the importance of prosocial goals more regularly.

Similarly, Norenzayan cites a number of studies which show that participants primed with God-related words tend to act more altruistically than those who don’t, even when this priming is done unconsciously, and even for people with various levels of religiosity. That is to say, it may not be just that religious meaning systems offer a set of values and encourage people to adhere to them, but religious meaning systems also tend to encourage church attendance, regular scripture reading, or regular private religious practices that further remind individuals of these values and the importance of adhering to them. Indeed, other religious beliefs, such as the tendency for gods to be all-knowing, and the belief that sinful or proscribed behavior will be punished with eternal damnation, likely further encourage the regular adherence to culturally valued norms and standards. These, in turn, can foster a sense of significance when individuals practice them.

The Uniqueness of Religious Community

Even though people can feel important and valued in their non-religious communities, the idea that there is something unique about religious communities has often been theorized (e.g., Lim & Putnam, 2010). Religious individuals may tend to invest more time and energy into these groups, or more regularly attend services. Although individuals could be just as devoted to their weekly book club meetings or softball practices, and gain a lot of support from the relationships and communities found there, one could presume that, overall, religious people would be more likely to invest time, energy, and resources in these communities than secular individuals may in
Theirs. However, research has shown that there may be something more going on than simply more frequent attendance. I will briefly discuss two studies that demonstrate this.

First, religious communities may be especially good at conferring and maintaining a sense of belonging in part because religious communities more often share a sense of identity, common values, and a common worldview. In a study conducted by Lim and Putnam (2010), the authors explored the relationship between religion and well-being by analyzing data collected between 2006 and 2007 as part of the Faith Matters study, a longitudinal, nationwide study that examines the relation between religiosity and social capital in the United States. From this data, Lim and Putnam compared multiple variables, including subjective well-being (measured as “life satisfaction”), denominational affiliation, and religious service attendance, as well as several measures of private religiosity (e.g., private religious practices, beliefs, and experiences), and several measures of social resources (e.g., size of intimate social networks and the number of close friends from the respondent’s religious congregation). As expected, the authors found higher levels of well-being among respondents who regularly attended religious services and built social networks within their congregation.

More interesting, however, is their finding that this association was actually mediated by religious identity; in their words, “the effect of within-congregation friendship [on life satisfaction] is contingent…on the presence of a strong religious identity” (p. 914). Their findings suggest that “among individuals with strong religious identities, friendships in a congregation have a dramatic effect on life satisfaction,” and by contrast, “congregational friendships have little effect on individuals who do not consider religion very important to their sense of self” (p. 923). In fact, religious identity was not significantly related to higher life satisfaction unless it was coupled with close religious friendships, leading the authors to
conclude that “only when people have both a strong sense of religious identity and within-congregation networks does religion lead to greater life satisfaction” (p. 923-924, emphasis added). Indeed, it seems plausible that the religious values of compassion and forgiveness may further foster close relationships, again enhancing religion’s ability to offer a sense of significance.

In explaining these findings, Lim and Putnam note that earlier studies have suggested that “people find social support more meaningful when it comes from someone with a shared sense of social identity” (e.g. Ellison & George, 1994, as cited in Lim & Putnam, 2010, p. 917). This may be because these individuals share “similar beliefs about the practice and meaning of helping behavior,” or, as has been argued elsewhere, because social support is more likely to be “received and interpreted in the spirit in which it is intended” when provided by someone with whom the individual shares a sense of social identity (Haslam et al., 2009, p. 11, as cited in Lim & Putnam, 2010, p. 916). Moreover, the homogeneity of worldviews and values found within a congregation likely enhances wellbeing because, according to social network scholars, “similarities in social ties foster empathetic understanding and mutual support” (Lim & Putnam, 2010, p. 924).

Indeed, with the understanding of values in relation to significance, that religious communities confer and encourage values at the same time as they offer a source of social support may further explain religion’s ability to confer a sense of significance. Therefore, religion may be uniquely predisposed to instill a sense of belonging because it not only encourages frequent service attendance, providing an opportunity to build close social ties, but also because it links this frequency of communal contact with shared beliefs and values, and because these shared beliefs and values further encourage prosociality and close ties. Though
book clubs and softball teams can offer wonderful opportunities for social connection, religion’s practice of encouraging socially cooperative values, along with the tendency for religion to be a larger and more meaningful part of an individual’s identity, make religious congregations especially adept at instilling a sense of belonging.

A second study further demonstrates the relationship between religious community and religious values, and how the confluence of these two sources of significance enable religion to be a unique and effective way for adherents to gain a sense of worth, value, and significance. In a study conducted by Neal Krause (2008), the author makes a distinction between the emotional support and spiritual support shared between church members. Spiritual support is defined as “assistance that is aimed specifically toward increasing the religious commitments, beliefs, and behavior of a fellow church member,” such as when coreligionists “share their own religious experiences… or show [fellow church members] how to apply their religious beliefs in daily life” (p. 397). By contrast, Krause describes emotional support as having less explicitly religious overtones, and involving “the provision of empathy, caring, love, and trust” (p. 398). By definition, then, spiritual support cannot be found outside of the religious or spiritual community (or, presumably, outside of interpersonal relationships with other religious individuals), and emotional support, on Krause’s conception, can be found in communities or relationships regardless of religiosity.

Consulting data from a nationwide longitudinal survey of older adults, Krause (2008) investigated whether or not social support from religious communities sustained an older person’s sense of religious meaning in life over time, and explored the distinction between spiritual support and emotional support as provided by the religious community. As expected, he found that the close, informal ties between community members do indeed help them maintain a
sense of religious meaning in life. More interesting, however, is his finding that, although both spiritual support and emotional support appear to bolster a sense of meaning in life initially, “when religious meaning is evaluated over time, the findings further reveal that spiritual support may play a larger part in this process” (p. 419-420). In this longitudinal study, Krause found that “spiritual support was associated with more stable religious meaning at the follow-up interview… In contrast, emotional support from fellow church members was not significantly associated with religious meaning at the follow-up survey” (p. 416). In summary, though the religious community appeared to bolster religious meaning in life through both emotional and spiritual support, the latter appears to play a more significant role. The reason that spiritual support plays a greater role, one could presume, is because this form of support offers both a sense of belonging and an emphasis on the importance of religious values.

Of course, spiritual support, as defined by Krause, could be seen as in a sense confounding two variables of our meaning in life conception. As Krause (2008) notes, “a deep sense of religious meaning is more likely to be sustained by more overt religious lessons and principles that are reinforced during informal interaction with fellow church members” (p. 420). In this sense, Krause’s findings may confound the influence of a religious community on a sense of coherence, with its influence on a sense of significance. This is especially possible because Krause’s meaning in life measure does not differentiate between the three aspects (coherence, purpose, and significance). Since Krause measures a general sense of meaning in life, and not the specific notion of significance discussed here, it could be said that spiritual support does not necessarily provide a greater sense of significance, per say, but instead boosts a sense of meaning in life because it reinforces the religious meaning system and its sense of certainty, order, and coherence. Perhaps, then, the additional wellbeing Krause observes from spiritual support has
already been accounted for in our discussions of coherence; that is, one could argue that spiritual support does not really have a unique relation to significance but rather to coherence.

Parsing these two subconstructs, coherence and significance, is difficult to do in light of the inconsistent operationalizations of meaning in life throughout the psychological literature. Moreover, it is difficult to distinguish these aspects because, as Martela and Steger (2016) note, coherence, purpose, and significance are deeply interdependent. Indeed, I argue that the higher levels of wellbeing that are often observed among religious individuals is in part due to religion’s ability to tie the three together; it is not just that religion provides coherence, or purpose, or significance, but that religion can often provide all three at once and allow each to reinforce the other. Indeed, the notion of significance, and its relation to both purpose and coherence, demonstrates the importance of understanding the multiple pathways between religion and wellbeing and how they influence one another. As Lim and Putnam (2010) conclude, “it is neither faith nor communities, per se, that are important, but communities of faith… praying together seems to be better than either bowling together or praying alone” (p. 927). We may add, then, that praying together about a coherent worldview that offers purpose in life and prescribes prosocial valuescreates an interconnected web of factors that makes religious meaning systems especially and uniquely capable of conferring and maintaining a sense of meaning in life, and therefore, wellbeing.
Conclusion

“In what sense is faith an impulse of human nature? In the sense that we need to respect our own endeavors, and hence to believe in something that will give reality and meaning to them.”

This work began with a question: could there be any connection between religion and mental health? A wealth of data gathered over the last few decades appears to answer affirmatively. Although this data does not necessarily paint a clear and uncomplicated picture, it does show that, in general and on average, religiosity appears to contribute to and/or be associated with better mental health and wellbeing. Even if we cannot answer that religion always and everywhere contributes to wellbeing, the general tendency for religion to lead to wellbeing merits an investigation of how and why this is so (and by extension, when and why religion’s connection to wellbeing falters).

The field of the psychology of religion, however, has yet to adequately explore the how and the why. The lack of continuity in operationalizations of religion, religious variables, and mental health and wellbeing variables is one issue at hand, and stems from a lack of unity in the field. For this reason, it is of utmost importance that this field builds towards a common framework for talking about religion and how it functions in people’s minds and lives. This framework not only needs to be one general enough to incorporate information from a range of

disciplines and across various levels of abstraction, but it also needs to be flexible enough to capture the many different ways of being, practicing, and relating to religion. Moreover, it needs to provide a framework of religion that incorporates and contextualizes the changing religious landscape. A theory that dichotomizes the spiritual and the religious, in light of the variety of “spiritual but not religious” existential worldviews, cannot stand. Such a priori conceptions of what religion is or consists of threaten the field’s ability to do justice the various and evolving modes of religiosity in our post-modern world.

The meaning systems conception of religion, as described by Paloutzian and Park (2005, 2013, 2015), offers a framework that appears promising in its ability to remedy these issues. It also allows for us to talk between the realm of religion and the realm of mental health. Our meaning systems not only impact our religiosity, but they have an integral, and perhaps underrepresented (at least in current mental healthcare culture—see Hansen, 2016 for more), role in our mental health and wellness. Beliefs about ourselves, the world, and each other, whether factual or false, contribute to the experiences of mental health and mental illness. The belief that the world is meaningless, for example, is often a refrain of depressed individuals; believing that others dislike you, or that the world is dangerous and unpredictable, are almost foundational characteristics of those who suffer from anxiety. Even outside of diagnosable mental illnesses, our beliefs about the world as loving and hopeful, terrifying and foreboding, or neutral and value-less have an effect on how we live our lives and how fulfilled our lives feel. Meaning systems, in this way, provide a framework for talking not only about religion, but about the many different psychological factors influencing our subjective experiences and producing (or failing to produce) a meaningful, flourishing life.
To really explore how religion constructs or deconstructs mental health and wellbeing, however, we need a framework to build wellbeing upon, and with which to link religion to markers of wellbeing. Though many potential mediating factors (of the relationship between religion and mental health) have been proposed, we cannot understand how these function in context and in tandem without a framework to contextualize and organize them. Religion’s benefits are not solely or universally from religious communities, nor are they solely or universally from religious beliefs. The human propensity (dare I say need?) for meaning may serve as a way to describe the effects religion has on wellbeing. If we can understand how people find meaning in their lives, and how religion impacts this, we may be able to understand how to encourage meaningful lives outside of religion.

Therefore, building on a meaning systems conception of religion (Paloutzian & Park, 2013), and a tripartite model of meaning in life (Martela & Steger, 2016), I have offered a framework for understanding the connections between religion and mental health that argues that the connection we see between religion and mental health is due to the fact that religious meaning systems are able to confer and maintain a sense of meaning in life. They are better able to do this because they frequently confer all three components of a meaningful life at once. The wholesale nature of religious meaning in life, along with religious practice and participation, allow for distinct subconstructs to influence one another, building positive feedback between them. Therefore, religion not only confers coherence, purpose, and significance, but allows for these three aspects of a meaningful life to strengthen one another.

Religious worldviews often teach that there is a comprehensible order to the universe, even if we humans cannot decipher it. The stories of religious texts can confer a sense of coherence about the world, producing palliative and anxiolytic effects. They also can have wide-
ranging influence on the lives of religious believers, allowing the totality of one’s life to be made
sense of within the same (often benevolent) religious context. More importantly, the belief that,
even when the world appears senseless, disordered, or incoherent, there is some greater order
that is clear to a higher power allows for coherence to be maintained in the face of randomness
and chaos. On top of all that, religions, through creeds, practices, and communities of faith,
encourage and reaffirm the beliefs that cohere. Fears of chaos and senselessness may be
assuaged insofar as believers are certain of their religious worldview, and insofar as religious
practices and communities strengthen this certainty.

Religions also provide a sense of purpose. Many insist that God has a plan for each of his
creations, and that pursuing the path God has laid out will bring them joy and please God. Again,
these kinds of purposes tend to unify one’s actions, providing a more comprehensive purpose
that allows many areas of life to be imbued with sacrality. They might motivate other beneficial
practices, such as meditation or helping those in need, that, even outside of a religious context,
can provide ample wellbeing benefits. Moreover, a religious conviction to connect with the
sacred can be maintained and pursued even as specific pathways to this end goal become
impassable. For example, pursuing a life as a medical professional may be one road towards
connecting with religious values of helping others. If life events make such a profession
impossible, however, religions can offer a number of other pathways towards the same religious
purpose. Religious purpose, therefore, may be more flexible and malleable than non-religious
ones, and thus more capable of maintaining a sense of purpose (and the wealth of wellbeing
benefits that result from this) through life’s ups and downs.

Finally, religion is able to instill a sense of significance in people’s lives. Religious
scriptures often promise the love and benevolence of a powerful deity, and are filled with heroic
and elaborate narratives that describe humanity’s place within the broader cosmos. These stories and teachings not only provide a sense of inherent value in human life, but they prescribe and encourage roles, values, and standards that offer a sense of significance beyond our mortal lives. These values, moreover, encourage prosocial behavior that not only uplifts the individual, but strengthens relationship ties in religious communities. In this way, the social foundations of a meaningful life can flourish in such communities, enhancing the individual’s self-worth, sense of belonging, and feelings of being connected to something greater. Not only that, but the religious community can offer emotional and spiritual support that is often deeper and more profound than the average secular community.

In this way, religiosity appears to have several characteristics—in the comprehensive reach of religious teachings, in the malleability/flexibility of religious beliefs, and in their conviction that we matter, to God, gods, and each other—that make it particularly suited to confer and maintain a sense of meaning in life. Moreover, insofar as religion confers all of these—coherence, purpose, and significance—within the same belief system, and as accompanied by religious rituals and communities, religion may allow for each of these aspects to influence and encourage each other. Not only does religion prescribe a system of beliefs that confer coherence, but it also frequently accompanies such a belief system with a community of people. This community of people, in turn, leads not only to feelings of significance, but emphasizes the beliefs of the community in ways that strengthen one’s certainty in them. Rather than attributing religions’ effects on wellbeing to one or the other of these characteristics, the meaning in life framework used here acknowledges the importance of multiple pathways between religion and wellbeing, and the relationships between these pathways. It is hoped, therefore, that the meaning in life framework may be able to organize a number of various
factors linking religion to wellbeing—in the present work, the meaning in life framework contextualized both how religious certainty and religious communities, through coherence and significance, contribute to wellbeing—and help us understand how these factors interact with each other to produce, or fail to produce, wellbeing benefits in the religious individual.

Of course, the above picture of religion is idealized and abstract. Not all religious traditions, and not all real-world examples of religious communities and traditions, function in ways that provide and maintain these benefits as described above. Indeed, I suspect that the data on religion and wellbeing bears this out. Although little time was spent in this work investigating the negative side of religion, various studies show that literal or orthodox beliefs (e.g., Janssen et al., 2005), or beliefs about human nature as inherently evil or sinful or about God as punitive or vindictive (e.g., Silton, Flannelly, Galek, & Elison, 2014; Flannelly, 2017) are associated with lower wellbeing. Religions that encourage excessive guilt, beliefs that humanity is irredeemably sinful, or that God is not loving and benevolent, then, may not be presumed to contribute to wellbeing, or may not be able to contribute to wellbeing in as many ways as other religions might. Further investigation into how and why religiosity fails to lead to wellbeing would, one might speculate, show that the religiosity did not confer or maintain the three components of a meaningful life.

The point is not that religion inherently leads to a meaningful life, or always to wellbeing, but that when religion does, it is likely because of its ability to confer meaning in life. Moreover, studying the how and why of religion’s connections to wellbeing, as well as ill-health, may be able to provide insight into what kind of meaning systems lead to wellbeing, and how to construct and maintain such systems. I do not argue that religion is always good for wellbeing; I argue, instead, that when it is beneficial to wellbeing, it may be beneficial because of the above
reasons. When it is not beneficial to wellbeing, and how and why religious variables produce maladaptive religious beliefs and behaviors, are important areas of future investigation. Though these are not the phenomena I spend most of the time investigating here, I believe that they may be able to be similarly mapped onto a meaning in life framework of religion’s relationship with wellbeing.

The framework I advocate for, and the argument I provide in support of it, may not be as precise and conclusive as one would hope. The realm of psychology of religion is somewhat new and scattered; the studies measuring “religion” and “mental health,” by the nature of these subjects, and the nature of psychological studies in general, are imperfect. Such phenomena as immense, complex, multifaceted, various, and important as religion, mental health, and wellbeing do not lend themselves to easy answers.

Moreover, the nature of my question is imprecise. Such a broad and general inquiry as “why does religion help mental health,” again, does not lend itself to a truly conclusive answer. I began with an even more general question, “does religion have an effect on mental health?” and the literature led me to confusing empirical data, although with a general trend towards a beneficial relationship between religion and mental health. When I wanted to know why this was the case, the literature quickly led to a rather unexciting conclusion: there were lots of ways religion might relate to mental health, but no one was providing any broad theory to explain why, or any framework to make senses of integrate these ways.

As such, I realize that the argument I present is neither tight nor precise. In attempting to sketch out a connection between such complex and varied dimensions of our lives as religion and
mental wellbeing are, especially without a pre-existing framework in which to situate this relationship, let alone an agreed-upon conception and operationalization of religion, I cannot hope to have found an irrefutable or incontestable, let alone provable, answer. Instead, I hope to have presented a compelling, if sketchy, possible framework with which to begin to understand the relationship between religion and mental health. Perfect theoretical frameworks do not pop into existence over night, and instead are pieced together, shaved down, improved upon, revised, problematized, and bettered.

I took a general trend in data, that drew from a nascent world of studies, which attempted to test two phenomena notoriously difficult to define and measure. I then tried to investigate this trend using a new and not yet widely used theoretical framework of religion, the meaning systems conception provided by Paloutzian and Park (2005, 2013, 2015), in such a way that would allow me to talk between the realms of religion and mental health. Finally, I needed to construct a framework for describing the many possible factors that mediate the relationship between religion and mental health and wellbeing that could similarly talk between religiosity and mental health, while also giving weight to the interrelated nature of the factors themselves. Each step in this process was imperfect and imprecise, drawing on literature that lacked common definitions and conceptions. Therefore, this work does not intend to present a solid and finished theoretical framework of religion’s relationship with mental health and wellbeing. Nevertheless, I do hope that the sketch of this relationship I provide, and the explanations for it that I propose, constitute a valuable first step—hopefully one pointing us in the right direction.
The Spirit of the Spiritless

Karl Marx famously described religion as “the opiate of the masses.” This refrain finds its genesis in his work, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, and reads in full:

> Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition that needs illusions. (as quoted in Hitchens, 2009, p. 9).

Marx, along with those who quote this passage and its famous refrain, proposes a critique of religion; it should be abolished because it is an illusory happiness that keeps us from discovering or demanding true happiness. In part, he may be right. Religion can be seen to cloak the trauma of humanity in a narrative of ultimate benevolence. At times throughout history, this opiate of hope and optimism has indeed been a weapon of oppression. But more than being decorative flowers in the chain of oppression, as Marx contends, religion can be a tool for our continued fight; it can be the force that motivates us to stand up, stand together, and demand peace. Moreover, it can be the light of hope through the suffering that not even freedom from systemic oppression could alleviate.

However, such meaningful, fulfilled, motivated lives do not depend on religious beliefs or traditions to find expression. I believe that secular, scientific meaning systems could construct a spirit for a spiritless people, a meaningful existence for the increasing number of people who live in a Creator-less world. Moreover, I’m not alone; Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and others parade a similar cause. They insist that meaning, hope, and morality can be had outside of religion. But these particular individuals, arguably the face of atheism today, make a mistake when they imply that science is as easy a foundation to build meaning from as is
religion, and they make a greater mistake when they presume secular meaning systems to be at odds with religious ones, or science at odds with religion. These mistakes are not only naive, but they hinder progress towards secular meaning in life.

To see how, I offer some critiques of Christopher Hitchens’ 2009 book god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything. In the introduction, Hitchens’ derides religion as irrational and argues that atheists can lead meaningful lives without it. He insists that “we infidels do not need any machinery of reinforcement… There is no need for us to gather every day, or even every seven days, or on any high and auspicious day, to proclaim our rectitude and to grovel and wallow in our unworthiness” (p. 6). But in fact, what some of this work shows contradicts this claim. While we do not need to “grovel and wallow in our unworthiness”—a phrase which is itself evident of Hitchens’ ignorant, lazy, and crude understanding of religion—it seems that one of the benefits afforded by religion is precisely this gathering-together. Maybe we do not need such machinery of reinforcement, but its likely we could benefit from it. Insofar as we are coming together to remind ourselves that the world is awe-inspiring, that there is hope for the future, and that we matter to each other and to those we care about, a regular gathering-together could be expected to produce similar wellbeing benefits that religious individuals enjoy.

Not only does religion boost wellbeing in its ability to bring people who share similar worldviews together to reinforce the benefits of these worldviews, but religions boost wellbeing because the practice of going to church or synagogue every week serves as a way to reconnect with what’s important to us. The ritual of these community gatherings builds into our lives a practice of getting outside of ourselves, of leaving the day’s or week’s worries at the door to come together and remind ourselves that, even when the world seems cold and dark, there is hope in tomorrow, hope in each other, and hope in ourselves. Hitchens and his cohorts, in their
attempts to ridicule every aspect of this complex and diverse phenomenon we call “religion,” ignore the insights thousands of years of human history have discovered. Coming together matters, talking to others about what we believe matters, regularly practicing hope, optimism, love, and forgiveness, if this idealized, abstract version of religion can be said to promote these, matter.

Of course, I am not advocating, especially in the current era of fake news and social bubbles, that we should shut ourselves off to people with different worldviews, or only look to those who agree with us for comfort and solace. I am, however, suggesting that a host of wellbeing benefits could be furnished by a regular practice of coming together, with a group of people we care about, and sharing our beliefs and our hopes. Maybe Hitchens does not need to come together with a community he feels a sense of belonging to and recount positive and hopeful stories with one another each week. There may, however, be some of us who could benefit from just such a practice—religious or otherwise.

Additionally, I wonder whether the pathway from non-religious meaning systems to meaningful lives is not quite as simple and obvious as Hitchens, it seems, believes it is. He argues in his book that atheists “are not immune to the lure of wonder and mystery and awe: we have music and art and literature, and find that the serious ethical dilemmas are better handled by Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Schiller and Dostoyevsky and George Eliot than in the mythical morality tales of the holy books” (Hitchens, 2009, p. 5). Again, I completely agree; art, music, and literature can all “sustain the soul,” as he describes (p. 5). Of course we don’t need religion to find values and morals, and of course scientific worldviews can be as awe-inspiring and enchanting as religious ones. However, Hitchens ignores a vital caveat: not everyone can read Shakespeare or have access to an education that explains the exquisite beauty of the solar system.
In this way, I fear that there is a hint of elitism and privilege, let alone classism and racism, in Hitchens’ contemptuous view of religion. In my own journey through mental illness, my depression-fueled belief that life and the world were utterly meaningless was only discarded because I was able to spend four years at an expensive liberal arts college, and I am all too aware that others do not have this same luxury. If meaningful meaning systems are to play any role in helping the average person live a happier, healthier life, we cannot in good conscience keep the pathways to a meaningful life locked away in libraries and universities. The idealized church is one with its doors open to the hungry, the poor, the disheartened. We need to follow religion’s lead, and bring pathways to meaning to people who would have trouble accessing them otherwise.

If the world is to go the way of the Norwegians, the Danish, and the Swedes, with secular institutions replacing the functions of religion, then we must also deal with the wellbeing functions religion serves (do we believe it a coincidence that the most secular countries are also those with the most comprehensive welfare systems?). The point, then, is that religion is assuredly not the only way to find meaning in life. Rather, the point is that religion may be a particularly adept and accessible way of doing so, and it may be a way that could teach secular meaning systems valuable lessons. If we want to share wellbeing and mental health with the non-religious, we will need to make finding meaning outside of religion accessible and emphasized. If secular meaning systems are to, en mass, become more meaningful and beneficial, to be on par with religious meaning systems, then we cannot leave existential, meaningful discussions to philosophy and academia; we need to encourage these elsewhere as well.

We cannot, from our Ivory Tower, look down upon the whole world of religious people as delusional and irrational. To do so is not only unscientific and biased, but it ignores the need
that religion can serve—the need to believe in something greater than ourselves, the need to believe in a world that we can make sense of, that empowers us to find a passion and follow it, and that tells us that we matter—if not to the cosmos, then to each other. Religion is not a single thing, nor is it the same for every religious person. We should seek to understand it, in its evil and in its benevolence. Indeed, we cannot hope to understand each other, all 8 billion or so of us on planet Earth, if we write off 97% of the world’s population as simply deluded. As Karen Armstrong (2015) notes,

Our world is dangerously polarized at a time when humanity is more closely interconnected—politically, economically, and electronically—than ever before. If we are to meet the challenge of our time and create a global society where all peoples can live together in peace and mutual respect, we need to assess our situation accurately. We cannot afford oversimplified assumptions about the nature of religion or its role in the world. What the American scholar William T. Cavanaugh calls ‘the myth of religious violence’ served Western people well at an early stage of their modernization, but in our global village we need a more nuanced view in order to understand our predicament fully. (p. 15-16)

Just as a British commercial describes, “the weather does a lot of different things—and so does religion” (Armstrong, 2015, p. 16). We should seek to understand these different things and how they function in the lives of religious people, how they lead to good and to bad, how they help, and how they hinder. We should seek to understand these things not only for the benefit of religious individuals, but for the benefit of agnostics, atheists, secular humanists, and everyone else.

Indeed, the current climate implores us to do so. With the state of mental health, especially in the United States, and especially among younger people—people also less likely to be religious—we may need to look beyond the hard sciences, beyond biology and medication, to find real solutions. Science, explicitly and necessarily stripped of meaning, cannot be the only tool we use to heal meaning-hungry humanity. We may need to explore other avenues. Instead of
recoiling from anything touched by the notion of religion, we secularists should embrace the wisdom of these traditions. That wisdom teaches us that, sometimes, irrational hope is more important than empirically-verified meaninglessness; that sharing our beliefs with others, as well as our hope and forgiveness, can boost our own wellbeing without forcing us to declare a belief in heaven or hell, Christ, Allah, or Vishnu. What these figures do, it seems, is provide an endlessly convenient way to maintain coherence, purpose, and significance in the face of a depressing or troubled world. Perhaps atheists, in reflecting on our beliefs and values, in sharing them with others, can find meaning to bolster our hope and happiness on.

Mental health issues are a growing concern, and we simply don’t yet have a solution to this issue. Religions throughout history have had at their foundation discussions of and pathways out of human suffering—discounting them as solely delusional and irrational, in the eyes of our beloved science, is the height of hubris. As Koenig, King, and Carson, 2012, note, “science and medicine have not solved all of humanity’s problems, as was promised during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries…progress in achieving meaning and purpose in life, improving the quality of relationships, achieving peace and well-being, and instilling human values of generosity, gratefulness, and forgiveness has fallen short” (p. 5). We cannot turn away from religion because we harbor a grudge against anti-science Christian fundamentalists, or because the image of Evangelical homophobia has tainted the whole of religion; we cannot afford such simplistic conceptions of something as widespread, consequential, and impactful as religion. Instead, to quote Karen Armstrong (2015), “somehow we have to find ways of doing what religion—at its best—has done for centuries: build a sense of global community, cultivate a sense of reverence and ‘equanimity’ for all, and take responsibility for the suffering we see in the world” (p. 401).
Dawkins, Hitchens, and others may deride religion as irrational, but sometimes even hope is irrational; that does not mean we do not need it.
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