Religious Struggles: 
A Fork in the Road to Health-Related 
Declines or Growth 

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Take-Home Points 
- Religious struggles are a natural and normal part of life 
- Religious struggles have profound implications for health and 
  well-being 
- Religious struggles are a fork in the road 
  - To decline 
  - To growth 
- Whether struggles lead to growth or decline depends on the degree 
  to which people have a well-integrated spirituality 
- We can draw on our knowledge and skills as pastors, chaplains, 
  and health professionals to help people through their religious 
  struggles. 
- Religious struggles are a vital topic for researchers and 
  practitioners interested in religion, health, and well-being.
A Radical Assumption

“We are spiritual as well as psychological, social, and physical beings.”

A Definition of Spirituality
(Pargament, 1997)

- Spirituality is a search for the sacred.
Reductionism

- Freud – religion as a means of anxiety reduction
- Durkheim – religion as a source of social solidarity
- Geertz – religion as a source of meaning
- Kirkpatrick – religion as an evolutionary by-product

“‘All of this talk about religion and spirituality is fine, but isn’t religion just a bunch of hormones?’”

(immunologist, personal communication)
Searching for the Sacred at an Early Age

“Dear God,
  How is it in heaven? How is it being the Big Cheese?”

Young Child (Heller, 1986, p. 31)

Children as Spiritual Beings

- The capacity for spiritual experience and knowledge
- The capacity to think about God as unique rather than humanlike
- The capacity to conceive of an immaterial spirit and an afterlife
- The capacity to experience spiritual emotions
Sacred Aspects of Life

- Psychological attributes (e.g., virtues, meaning)
  “The things that come from God are the highest things that we look for in life; peace and joy and love and beauty and health and vitality and strength and wisdom and creativity and abundance and the whole cookie factory. . . God gives these resources to us like the sun gives light” (interviewee).

- Cultural products (e.g., music, literature)
  “We have so much misery and suffering here. So much difficulties and pain. But soccer is our gift from God. Our healing grace so that we Brazilians can go on” (Rev. Filiho, Washington Post)
Sacred Aspects of Life

- Psychological attributes (e.g., virtues, meaning)
- Cultural products (e.g., music, literature)
- **People (e.g., saints, cult leaders)**

Manifestations of God in People

“God has a deep raspy voice – God is a jazz singer. She is plush, warm, and rosy – God is a grandmother. He has the patient rock of an old man in a porch rocker; He hums and laughs, he marvels at the sky. God coos at babies – she is a new mother. He is the steady, gentle hand of a nurse, the cool reassurance of a person pursuing his life’s work, and the free spirit of a young man wandering only to live and love life” (McCarthy, 2006).
Perceptions of Sacredness: Results of a National Survey

- “I see evidence of God in nature and creation” (78%)
- “I see God’s presence in all of life” (75%)
- “I sense that my spirit is part of God’s spirit” (68%)
- “I experience something more sacred in life than simply material existence” (76%)
- “I see my life as a sacred journey” (55%)

Pathways to the Sacred

- The Pathway of Knowledge
Beliefs in a Sheltering, Protective God

Pathways to the Sacred

- The Pathway of Knowledge
- The Pathway of Practice
The Practice of Prayer

Pathways to the Sacred

- The Pathway of Knowledge
- The Pathway of Practice
- The Pathway of Relationships
A Convoy over the Lifespan

Pathways to the Sacred

- The Pathway of Knowledge
- The Pathway of Practice
- The Pathway of Relationships
- The Pathway of Emotions
Sacred Emotions:
Joy

Sacred Emotions:
Awe
Sacred Emotions: Gratitude

Sacred Emotions: Love and Compassion
Pathways to the Sacred

- The Pathway of Knowledge
- The Pathway of Practice
- The Pathway of Relationships
- The Pathway of Emotions
- The Pathway of Coping

Spiritual Coping by Helping Others
The Resilience of Religion

- 70% of trauma survivors reported no change in religious beliefs following their first (or only) trauma; 73% reported no change in religiousness after the second event (Falsetti et al, 2003).
- 61% of Holocaust survivors reported no change in religious behavior before the Holocaust, immediately after, and today (Brenner, 1980).

Triggers of Struggle: Illness
Triggers of Struggle: Natural Disaster

Triggers of Struggle: Transgressions
A Definition of Religious Struggles

- Religious struggles refer to experiences of tension, strain, and conflict about spiritual matters within oneself, with others, and with God.

Three Types of Religious Struggle

- Intrapersonal
- Interpersonal
- Divine
Intrapersonal Religious Struggles

“Is Christianity a big sham, a cult? If an organization were to evolve in society, it would have to excite people emotionally, it would have to be self-perpetuation, it would need a source of income, etc. Christianity fits all of these. How do I know that I haven’t been sucked into a giant perpetual motion machine” (Kooistra, 1990, p. 95)?

Interpersonal Religious Struggles

- Negative interactions among congregation members:
  - Gossiping
  - Cliquishness
  - Hypocrisy
  - Disagreements with doctrine
- “They get off in a corner and talk about you and you’re the one that’s there on Saturday working with their children and washing the dishes on Sunday afternoon. They don’t have the Christian spirit” (Krause et al., 2000).
Divine Struggles

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why are thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent” (Psalms XXII, 1-2).

Divine Struggles

“I’m suffering, really suffering. My illness is tearing me down, and I’m angry at God for not rescuing me, I mean really setting me free from my mental bondage. I have been dealing with these issues for ten years now and I am only 24 years old. I don’t understand why he keeps lifting me up, just to let me come crashing down again” (undergraduate dealing with bipolar illness).
Religious Struggles Are Not Uncommon

- 50% of undergraduates experienced negative feelings toward God in response to a negative life event (Exline & Kampani, 2001)
- One out of five individuals reported moderate or high levels of religious struggles in a study of three groups of medical patients (Fitchett et al., 2001)
- 65% of adult sample reported religious conflicts, largely interpersonal in nature (Nielsen, 1998)

Guess the Struggler

▶ “I am told God lives in me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.”
Assessing Religious Struggles: Illustrative Items

- I wonder if God has abandoned me.
- I feel angry at God.
- I feel abandoned by people in my church.
- I disagree with family and friends about spiritual matters.
- I feel confused about my faith
- I act inconsistently with my religious beliefs

Spirituality and Health Study (McConnell et al., 2006)

- Participants
  - 1629 participants
  - Age: Mean = 49.1 years, SD = 17.76
  - 75.3% Christian
  - 56.2% Attend religious services “almost every day” or “every day”
  - 55.3% Engage in private prayer “almost every day” or “every day”
  - 59.9% “Very religious” or “fairly religious”
Spirituality and Health Study
(McConnell et al., 2006)

- Measures
  - Mental Health: Symptom Assessment-45 Questionnaire
    (Davison, Bershady, Bieber, Silversmith, Maruish, & Kane, 1997)
    - Anxiety
    - Depression
    - Hostility
    - Interpersonal Sensitivity
  - Obsessive-Compulsive
  - Paranoid Ideation
  - Phobic Anxiety
  - Somatization
  - Social Support: Six items adapted from previous research (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988)

Summary
- Religious struggle positively associated with all forms of psychopathology after controlling for demographic variables and social support
- Relationship between religious struggle and psychopathology stronger for individuals with recent illness or injury
Religious Struggle as a Predictor of Addiction
(Caprini & Pargament, 2008)

- 90 freshmen complete measures of addiction and religious struggles at three points in time over first year of college
- After controlling for neuroticism, social support, and global religiousness, spiritual struggles predict greater likelihood of developing 11 of 15 types of addictive behaviors, including
  - Gambling
  - Food starving
  - Prescription and recreational drugs
  - Sex

Religious Coping among Medically Ill Elderly Patients: A Two-Year Longitudinal Study

- 596 hospitalized patients over 55
- Duke University Medical Center
- Durham VA Medical Center
- 1996-1997
- Two year follow-up
- 176 deceased
Measures

- Number of Active Diagnoses
- Subjective Health
- Severity of Illness Scale (ASA)
- Activities of Daily Living (ADL)
- Mini-Mental State Exam (MSE)
- Depressed Mood
- Quality of Life
- Positive Religious Coping and Religious Struggle
- Global Religious Measures (Church Attendance, Private Religiousness, Religious Importance)
- Demographics

Consequences of Religious Struggles

- Struggles with the divine predicted increases in depressed mood, declines in physical functional status, declines in quality of life after controls
- Struggles with the divine predicted 22-33% greater risk of mortality after controls
Specific Religious Struggle Predictors of Mortality

- “Wondered whether God had abandoned me” (RR = 1.28)
- “Questioned God’s love for me” (R = 1.22)
- “Decided the devil made this happen” (R = 1.19)

Religious Struggles among Patients with Multiple Myeloma
(Sherman et al., 2005)

- 213 multiple myeloma patients
- Negative religious coping associated with greater fatigue, pain, clinician and self-rated depression, and distress
- Other measures of religiousness were unrelated to indices of health
Ano and Vasconcelles Meta-Analysis

<table>
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<th>Number of Studies</th>
<th>Cumulative Effect Size</th>
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<td>Religious Struggles with Negative Health Outcomes</td>
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Correlates of Religious Struggles among Muslims
(Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2006)

- Depression \( r = .35 \)
- Purpose in Life \( r = -.41 \)
- Angry Feelings \( r = .32 \)
- Positive Relationships \( r = -.44 \)
- Alcohol Use \( r = .62 \)
- Poorer Physical Health \( r = .35 \)
Correlates of Religious Struggles among Hindus
(Tarakeshwar et al., 2003)

- Depression $r = .40$
- Life Satisfaction $r = -.40$
- Marital Satisfaction $r = -.27$

Correlates of Religious Struggles among Jews
(Rosmarin, 2008)

- Depression $r = .34$
- Anxiety $r = .27$
- Worry $r = .15$
Religious Struggle as a Dark Night of the Soul

“The Divine assails the soul in order to renew it and thus to make it Divine . . . As a result of this, the soul feels itself to be perishing and melting away, in the presence and sight of its miseries, in a cruel spiritual death . . . For in this sepulcher of dark death it might abide until the spiritual resurrection which it hopes for” (Saint John of the Cross, 1584/1910).

Religious Struggles as Launching Pads for Transformation

“Without struggle, we would remain frozen in the religion of our childhood, crystalline structures ill-equipped to deal with the changes we experience within ourselves over time and the changes we encounter in a complex, fast-paced world.”
Religious Struggles and Growth

- Among members of churches that were close to the site of the Oklahoma City bombing, higher levels of religious struggle were linked with greater stress-related growth.
- Medically ill elderly patients who voiced more religious struggles also reported greater spiritual growth.
- College students who reported that they had experienced a sacred violation (i.e., desecration) in a romantic relationship also reported more growth following the trauma (e.g., new priorities in life, greater self-reliance, more closeness to God, enhanced spirituality).

Questions about Religious Struggles

- Must people go through a “dark night of the soul” to grow?
- Do people simultaneously experience “pain and gain” from their religious struggles?
- What determines whether religious struggles lead to serious problems (and even death) or personal growth and transformation?
What Determines the Resolution of Religious Struggles?

- Religious support vs. religious stigma
- Religious flexibility vs. religious inflexibility
- Large gods vs. small gods

Religious Stigma of Spiritual Struggles

- Of African American men in homeless shelters, 46% reported that negative feelings toward God were unacceptable (Smith & Exline, 2002).
- A mother’s response to the introduction of evolution into a university’s curriculum: “If [my daughter’s] faith is shattered or shaken, I’d rather see her dead” (Nesson, 2001).
McIntosh and Spilka Study

- People who are both highly religious committed and spiritually flexible showed fewer physical symptoms, greater well-being, and better life adjustment.

Religious Struggle at Two Times

- CHRONIC (High Struggle at Baseline and High Struggle at Follow Up)
  - ACUTE (Low Struggle at Baseline and High Struggle at Follow Up)
  - ACUTE (High Struggle at Baseline and Low Struggle at Follow Up)
  - NONE (Low Struggle at Baseline and Low Struggle at Follow Up)
Small Gods

- The Grand Old Man
- The God of Absolute Perfection
- The Heavenly Bosom
- The Resident Policeman
- The Distant Star
- The God in Retirement
Practical Implications

- Keep an Eye Out for People who are Struggling

Brief Screening for Spiritual Struggles

- Anger at God
- Punished by God
- Abandonment by God
- Disappointment with religious institutions
- Questions about faith
- Demonic appraisals of negative life events
Practical Implications

- Keep an Eye Out for People who are Struggling
- Listen to and Normalize Religious Struggles
- Build Bridges with Religious Communities
General Opening: Religious or spiritual issues often influence how patients deal with or cope with cancer. Some people find their spiritual beliefs to be very helpful, while others do not find them helpful or never really think about these things at all. I would be interested to understand better how you feel about this.

Inquiry about Beliefs: What part, if any, do your spiritual beliefs play in how you have been dealing with your cancer?
Exploring Beliefs (depending on response to inquiry)

a. Supportive God (Healing as part of God’s plan; Turning illness over to God; Increased faith)

Tell me more about your beliefs. What have you found most helpful about your beliefs since your illness?

b. Positive/Non-specific (Haven’t thought about it much; Might help but not sure; Some practices but not strong)

How might religious or spiritual practices be helpful to you? How might you draw on your faith or spiritual beliefs to help you?
Exploring Beliefs (depending on response to inquiry)
c. Spiritual Conflict/Anger or Guilt (Cancer is form of punishment; feel abandoned; anger at God)
Tell me more about your beliefs. What if anything has helped you come to terms with these feelings?

d. Rejecting Spiritual/Religious Beliefs (I don’t believe in that stuff; None of your business; This isn’t a medical concern).
I’m sorry if I offended you. But I would like to understand better what has been helping you to cope. What have you found helpful?
OASIS
Rhodes and Kristeller (2000)

Exploring Meaning and Peace: Are there ways in which you have/can find a sense of meaning and peace through all of this?

Exploring Communication with Others: Is there anyone else (e.g., minister, friend) you can talk to about these concerns? If not, can I help you find someone?

Exploring Other Resources: Are there any other resources you could draw on (e.g. support group/retreat, readings)?

OASIS
Rhodes and Kristeller (2000)

Closing the Conversation: I appreciate you discussing these issues with me. May I ask you about them again?
OASIS: Key Results
Rhodes and Kristeller (2000)

- Greater improvements over 3 weeks in depression and overall quality of life than controls
- Greater improvements in satisfaction with interpersonal care and communication with physician than controls
- Oncologists report feeling comfortable and confident during intervention
- Patients report feeling comfortable, and majority reported increased satisfaction with care and benefits in coping
- No patient reported being offended or disturbed by the intervention, even when they reported the intervention to be irrelevant or of no utility

Practical Implications

- Keep an Eye Out for People who are Struggling
- Listen to and Normalize Religious Struggles
- Build Bridges with Religious Communities

- Develop and Evaluate Interventions to Address Religious Struggles
Lighting the Way: Table of Contents

Session 1: Wholeness & Healing  
*Goals for the Session:* Define healing; Encourage the view of healing as a process; Identify barriers and resources towards feeling healed

Session 2: Body & Spirit  
*Goals for the Session:* Identify how body and Spirit interact with one another; Identify eternal things about the self that cannot be touched by the disease; Identify how to recognize when the Spirit is hungry and how to sustain it

Session 3: Isolation & Intimacy  
*Goals for the Session:* Normalize the experiences of isolation and concerns with intimacy and explore the possible impact on coping; Identify definitions of isolation and intimacy; Discuss experiences with isolation and concerns about intimacy; Explore the disconnection from God and other people that can result from living with HIV/AIDS

Session 4: Letting Go of Anger  
*Goals for the Session:* Discuss different ways of experiencing and expressing anger; Discuss the effects of anger; Identify objects of anger; Discuss and normalize anger at God; Introduce the possibility of letting go of destructive anger

Session 5: Shame & Guilt  
*Goals for the Session:* Normalize the experience of shame and guilt and the potential impact of shame and guilt on healing; Identify messages, spiritual and otherwise, of shame that we hear from others, messages of guilt we tell ourselves and messages of God that counter these shame and guilt messages; Encourage self-love and self-forgiveness as healing alternatives to shame and guilt

Session 6: Control vs. Active Surrender  
*Goals for the Session:* Embrace the paradoxical nature of surrender; Identify things that are under personal control and things that are beyond personal control; Identify barriers that make letting go difficult; Learn how to surrender to God and begin the process of letting go

Session 7: Hopes & Dreams  
*Goals for the Session:* Identify dreams from before HIV; Discuss dreams that have been lost; Identify dreams that are still possible; Discuss the differences between False Dreams and Possible Dreams; Identify new dreams to pursue and how to redefine God’s Purpose in life

Session 8: A Review of the Journey  
*Goals for the Session:* Review the process of healing; Discuss the goals that group members have attained and those they feel they have yet to achieve; Review the main points of each session; Say goodbye
**Lighting the Way: Travel Kit**

**Compass:** A compass helps you find your way when you are lost. This compass symbolizes the resources you need to navigate along your path toward wholeness and overcome the barriers you may face. It also reminds you to have faith in and trust God to help you find your way.

**Cup:** The cup represents the eternal purity of the soul. This is a reminder that although the body is finite, the soul is everlasting. This cup reminds you to replenish your spirit when it becomes dry.

**Yarn:** The piece of yarn represents your connectedness with others and with God. Even during times when you do not feel connected to others, you are still connected to and can have a relationship with God.

**Rock:** The rock is a reminder that when you carry too much anger, although you may feel strong and powerful at first, over time you will become tired and this will cause your journey to be slow and painful. Letting go of your anger and pain and putting it in the hands of God can bring you relief and a sense that God truly loves you.

**Umbrella:** The umbrella represents the sheltering function of God’s love. It also serves to protect you from your own messages of guilt and others’ messages of shame.

**Serenity Prayer Card:** At times it is hard to determine whether something is under your control or beyond your control. This prayer reminds you that sometimes you may need God’s help to tell you what you need to surrender to a higher power. It also reminds you to take the opportunity to accept God’s help along the way.

**Dream Catcher:** The dream catcher represents that, despite your illness, you still have dreams. These dreams can continue to provide you with a sense of meaning and purpose in your life. Remember, you can still work toward fulfilling your dreams.

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**Lighting the Way: Analysis**

Tarakeshwar et al. (2005)

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Winding Road: Goals

- Articulate and normalize religious struggles
- Facilitate development of personal spiritual identity
- Broaden and deepen understanding of sacred
- Broaden coping resources
- Facilitate acceptance of struggles
- Facilitate forgiveness

Winding Road: Illustrative Activities

- Write and share spiritual autobiography
- Share religious struggles
- Create religious genogram
- Visualize ideal older spiritual self
- Share a sacred object with the group
- Surrender ritual
- Write a group-lament to God
Winding Road: Quantitative Results

Decline in Religious Struggles $< p. 01$
Decline in Negative Affect $< p. 05$
Decline in Psychological Distress $< p. 01$
Decrease in Stigmatization $< p. 05$
Increase in Positive Affect $< p. 05$
Increase in Behavioral Control $< p. 05$
Increase in Emotional Control $< p. 05$
Increase in Religious Value-Behavior Congruence $< p. 05$
Increase in Acceptance from God $< p. 05$

Winding Road: Qualitative Results

❖ Greater Acceptance of Struggles

“I’m ok with the fact that I have struggles now. It’s ok for me to be struggling with this. Its ok to not have the answer right now. That’s a little scary but that’s ok. Its ok to be scared, its ok to be confused and just take my time, try to figure it out, and not let anybody else pressure me about things.”
Winding Road: Qualitative Results

- Less Stigmatization and Alienation
  “It gave me a place to talk to others about spiritual struggles who were having the same struggles…It was really helpful because it helped me to see I wasn’t the only one going through it. We came to discover that we could really open up to each other without worrying about judgment or anything.”

Winding Road: Qualitative Findings

- Greater Religious Individuation
  “My biggest problem was feeling like I was a bad person because I wasn’t the same religion as my friends who pretty much attacked me. After this [group], it made me realize I am fine with the way I am. I don’t need to change for anyone else. Just because I’m not like everybody else doesn’t make me a bad person…I just makes me, me.”
Winding Road: Qualitative Findings

- Broader and Deeper Sense of the Sacred
  “Before I felt I was being punished for certain things and I felt that I wasn’t a good enough person for God. Through the discussions I realized that God’s love is unconditional and I started to display that love and cradle myself in that love…Before I had conflicting ideas of God between what I’d read/heard and what I felt. After the group I kind of feel what I read and what I’ve heard.”

- Growth and Transformation
  “I had a lot of rash emotions coming into this experience. It’s definitely calmed me down a little bit. I look at my struggles as more of a positive. It is a learning and growing experience. I’ve matured in my view of the struggle – that it doesn’t have to be resolved right now. But I got a lot of new ideas, that I can come back to in the future if I need to. I’ve been able to get a lot of my struggle sorted out and get a clearer idea of what’s going on. Now it’s not always pestering me. I was able to detangle it a little bit… Now it’s not so much of a struggle as an evolution.”
Practical Implications

- Keep an Eye Out for People who are Struggling
- Listen to and Normalize Religious Struggles
- Build Bridges with Religious Communities
- Develop and Evaluate Interventions to Address Religious Struggles

- Help People Anticipate Religious Struggles before They Occur

Religious Struggles as a Fork in the Road to Growth or Decline