



# The Science of Religion, Spirituality, and Existentialism

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## Chapter 20 - Meaning, religious/spiritual struggles, and well-being

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### Abstract

Theoretically, religions and spirituality (R/S) can help people maintain well-being and meaning in life, but these relationships are not simple or without conflict and ambivalence. This chapter first provides an overview of theories and research linking the psychology of religion to positive psychology. A theoretical reevaluation of supernaturalism as an ambivalent aspect of R/S meaning systems follows. Then, the chapter turns to R/S struggles, which may involve conflicts with deities, supernatural evil forces, and R/S people, as well as intrapersonal turmoil about morality, R/S doubts, and a lack of meaning in life. We reframe these constructs in terms of existential threats, explaining how each R/S struggle may affect meaning through known existential challenges. A brief review of recent research connecting R/S struggles to health, well-being, and R/S meaning supports the relevance of R/S struggles to positive and existential psychology. Finally, the chapter discusses the potential for growth through R/S struggles.



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## Keywords

Religion; spirituality; struggle; existential threat; meaning; well-being; supernatural; existential psychology

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Religious and spiritual (R/S) struggles are a topic of growing interest within the psychology of religion and spirituality (R/S). R/S struggles mark a point of connection between the psychology of R/S and existential psychology, particularly where the latter focuses on concepts of existential threats. Several reviews emphasize the relationships of well-being and distress to R/S in general, and R/S struggles in particular ([Exline, 2013](#), [Exline and Rose, 2013](#), [Pargament, 2007](#), [Pargament et al., 2005](#), [Stauner et al., 2016](#), [Wilt et al., 2017](#)). This chapter offers an update with a special focus on the implications of R/S struggles for existential meaning and threats to it.

In recognition of the dominantly positive themes of research connecting R/S to well-being, we begin with a brief review of the connections between the psychology of R/S and positive psychology. This introduction sets the stage for a short theoretical reevaluation of supernaturalism as an aspect of R/S with particularly mixed implications for meaning and well-being that deserve further research. These points in turn motivate our discussion of R/S struggles, which blend supernatural, secular, and spiritual themes with existential threats that have mostly negative implications for meaning and well-being, distinguishing them as relatively unique and important constructs in the psychology of R/S. Our theoretical reframing of R/S struggles in terms of existential threats further emphasizes their relevance to existential psychology. Finally, we reinforce the connections between R/S struggles and positive psychology with a brief update to previous reviews on recent research relating R/S struggles to health, well-being, and R/S meaning, and close with discussion of the potential for personal and spiritual growth through successful resolution of R/S struggles.

## Overview of the positive psychology of religions and spirituality

R/S can help people develop and maintain well-being and meaning in life (for a recent review, see [Wilt, Stauner, & Exline, 2017](#)). A theoretical postulate with considerable popularity and support in the psychology of R/S is that religions benefit health and well-being generally. However, an important preface to this point is that most supportive literature relies on nonexperimental evidence from primarily Christian populations, especially in the United States ([Park & Slattery, 2013](#)). Ethical and practical limitations often preclude such research, and theorists often substitute correlational evidence, though this

can neither establish causality nor rule out other possibilities, such as potential influences of well-being on religiousness. Furthermore, correlational research outside the United States mixes partial support for religiousness' positive relationship to well-being with the evidence of strong moderation by culture, such that religiousness relates negatively to well-being in many relatively secularized and highly developed cultures (e.g., western and northern Europe; [Gebauer et al., 2017](#)).

With these caveats in mind the following brief summary of literature is meant to give a basic sense of the wealth of supportive empirical evidence and richness of theory as to how R/S may benefit people. An extensive body of research documents positive associations between religious involvement and physical and mental health (for reviews, see [Aldwin, Park, Jeong, & Nath, 2014](#); [George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002](#); [Koenig, 2012](#); [Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012](#); [Wilt, Stauner, Lindberg, et al., 2017](#)). Several mechanisms have been highlighted for these associations.

First, religious involvement is often linked with greater self-control (see [McCullough & Willoughby, 2009](#), for a review) and better behavioral regulation skills ([Aldwin et al., 2014](#)), which often take the form of more positive health behaviors. For example, greater religiousness has been associated with lower levels of smoking, drinking alcohol, and risky sexual behaviors, along with a greater likelihood of medical screenings (for reviews, see [Aldwin et al., 2014](#); [Koenig, 2012](#)).

Second, religious involvement often provides access to social support networks ([George et al., 2002](#)), both directly through congregational and clergy support (e.g., [Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000](#); [Salsman, Brown, Brechting, & Carlson, 2005](#)) and indirectly through factors such as increased marital stability ([Koenig, 2012](#)) and a sense of community and shared values ([Graham & Haidt, 2010](#)).

Third, R/S provide people with access to a wide array of religious coping strategies ([Pargament, 2006](#); [Pargament, Falb, Ano, & Wachholtz, 2013](#); [Pargament, Feuille, & Burdzy, 2011](#); [Pargament et al., 2000](#); [Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998](#); [Pargament, Tarakeshwar, Ellison, & Wulff, 2001](#)). Religious coping can take many forms, ranging from religious social support (see earlier) to appraisal-based strategies: seeing a deity's benevolence in a stressful situation, for example, or partnering with God(s) to solve a problem. Many people see God(s) as benevolent, relational, and a powerful source of security (for a review, see [Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010](#)). Religions can provide people with a vicarious sense of control in stressful situations through beliefs in and identification with God(s) ([Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010](#)). Religious belief in an afterlife can also help to reduce

anxiety around the prospect of death (Vail et al., 2010) and comfort following bereavement (Smith, Range, & Ulmer, 1992).

Fourth, and most centrally for the purposes of this chapter, R/S constitute existential meaning systems and contribute interactively with other compatible meaning systems to the global sense of meaning in life (Park, 2019, Park et al., 2013). Beyond the experience-organizing meaning provided by the metaphysical beliefs that define and motivate R/S worldviews, R/S inform value systems (Schwartz, 2012), prescribe and sanctify personal goals (Emmons, 1999), and train behavioral routines and lifestyles that create order in daily life.

The resources R/S offer for meaning-making and coping overlap considerably, since part of the meaning R/S provide also comes through promises of solutions or support for coping with existential threats. Throughout this chapter, our discussion of existential threats follows the structure of Yalom's (1980) theory, according to which four primary threats apply to humanity in general:

1. *mortality*—the loss of personal identity, the discontinuation of experience, bereavement from loved ones, and the limits to personal power implied by human frailty and limited lifespans;
2. *isolation*—the intrinsic and largely inevitable separation of individuals' experiences and consciousness that defies the needs for relational intimacy and mutual understanding;
3. *freedom*—the lack of inherently clear and predetermined, purposive directions for individuals' behavioral choices, and the burden of responsibility individuals thus bear for these choices and their consequences; and
4. *meaninglessness*—the similar, apparent lack of a clear, inherent order and meaning to life and existence in general, and the confusing randomness of events and circumstances outside personal control.

Briefly stated, R/S often address and can partially mitigate each of these threats via multiple mechanisms including afterlife and eschatological beliefs (potentially reducing the existential threat of mortality), identification and often the hope of ultimate unification with divinity and the virtuous (mitigating existential isolation), prescriptions of moral codes and calls to R/S causes (reducing the meaning threat of overwhelming freedom and responsibility for behavioral decision-making), and metaphysical beliefs about the origins of the universe and causes of events (reducing their apparent meaninglessness).

The potential of R/S to provide meaning is a particularly important premise for this chapter, because meaning may mediate positive effects of religiousness on well-being ( [Steger & Frazier, 2005](#)). Yet the meaning systems offered by R/S often contain many challenges and complications that may also cause or exacerbate existential problems and threaten well-being. People may experience these problems as R/S struggles, or separate R/S struggles may also cause or result from existential problems that occur in R/S life.

## The mixed blessing of supernaturalism

Supernaturalism is a core aspect of many R/S worldviews that exemplifies their potential to both provide and challenge the subjective sense of global meaning in life. For the purposes of this chapter, we define *supernaturalism* broadly as the general belief in agentic entities or phenomena that transcend conventional understandings of nature. Supernatural beliefs often serve to explain macrocosmic, foundational, or extremely influential events and states of existence, such as the origins and structure of the natural universe and supernatural domains (e.g., heaven, the pure land, and hell) and the causes of natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes and hurricanes) and the outcomes of geopolitical events (e.g., wars). Supernaturalism itself and R/S worldviews that incorporate supernaturalism thus constitute systems of relatively deep, transcendent meaning when compared to more secular, mundane, or self-centered systems of meaning such as some popular forms of hedonism, materialism, and social status-seeking. To this extent that supernaturalism provides deep meaning, this may imply a greater potential for well-being benefits ([Reker, 2000](#)); perhaps it implies greater consequentiality in general, including heightened risks as well.

Major themes of supernaturalism include supernatural entities and supernatural states of existence. Research relating these themes to meaning and well-being is sparse, but some positive connections have been established. Regarding supernatural entities, most theory, research, and perhaps even most R/S activity in the general population focuses on God(s). Although the generalizability of existing research is limited by its overrepresentation of Christian populations in North America and Europe, this research demonstrates the popularity (within the given populations, at least) of God images with desirable characteristics such as benevolence, compassion, and relational closeness ( [Exline, Grubbs, & Homolka, 2015](#)). Believing that such a powerful, benevolent supernatural agent is on one's side can give a sense of power, security, and hope for the future.

Experiences of the divine sometimes occur as peak experiences, through which the individual may experience a broader sense of connection to self-transcendent aspects of existence (e.g., truth itself, sacred values, and all of humanity), escape (if temporarily) one's present- and self-focused worries, build valuable memories that may form pivotal parts of

one's life narrative, and receive insights that lead to reevaluations and reorientations of one's purpose and way of life (Yaden, 2019). Peak experiences in general thus contribute to meaning, and though research is sparse and nascent on peak R/S experiences in particular, it seems unlikely that an exception to the general relationship would apply broadly to peak R/S experiences. Experiences of the divine may also contribute to meaning or reinforce it through implications about other supernatural aspects of experience, such as the qualities of experiences anticipated to occur after death. Reassuring or revelatory experiences of a benevolent, supportive God may often seem to imply that a positive afterlife in communion with the divine awaits after death, as many R/S belief systems attest. Thus through both personal experiences and common beliefs, R/S may help to manage the existential threat of mortality by encouraging afterlife beliefs (e.g., Vail et al., 2010).

Preliminary evidence supports afterlife belief as a partial mediator of effects of religiousness on meaning in life, whereas divine attributions seem less likely to mediate effects of religiousness on meaning (Stauner & Exline, 2018). Speculatively speaking, this may reflect the complexity and ambivalence of supernatural attributions and these experiences may sometimes cause stress. To the extent that supernatural attributions are subjectively abnormal and violate expectations, they may threaten one's sense of coherence or comprehension, a facet of meaning (George and Park, 2016, George and Park, 2017, Martela and Steger, 2016). However, preliminary analyses indicate positive relationships between meaning in life and the recalled frequency of supernatural attributions, though an ambivalent mixture of positive relationships with both positive and negative affect accompanies these results (Michel, Stauner, & Exline, in preparation).

The psychological dynamics and ramifications of supernatural attributions may vary the across concepts of different supernatural entities and interact with characteristics of the events in question. For instance, although attributing stressful life events to the planful influence of a supreme being may provide a subjective sense of meaning and hope, it may also raise theodical issues such as the question of whether one's God is truly omnibenevolent (Hale-Smith et al., 2012, Wilt et al., 2017).

When people attribute suffering and stressful events to divine influences, they may prefer to interpret these influences as benevolent rather than cruel (e.g., as a way of teaching people strength or sending some other meaningful message; Wilt, Exline, et al., 2017). Undergraduates at Florida State University reported that divine attributions for Hurricane Hermine gave them a sense of meaning (Stauner, Exline, Fincham, & May, 2018); this and three other studies indicated that people report more divine attributions when they consider these attributions more meaningful (



[Stauner, Exline, Fincham, May, & Baumeister, 2018](#)). Thus divine attributions for stressful events seem more likely to function (at least subjectively) as a form of positive religious coping than as negative coping or divine struggle. This relative rarity of divine struggle in response to stress makes R/S struggle harder to understand for both researchers and the general public, though it also makes focused research on the topic all the more valuable.

Although the idea of divine struggle might seem absurd for nontheists, divine struggles such as anger toward God(s) are endorsed by some atheists ([Sedlar et al., 2018](#)) and those who are identified as nonreligious and nonspiritual ([Stauner et al., 2015](#), [Stauner et al., 2016](#)). Many members of these populations may have coherent concepts of a hypothetical God ([Bradley, Exline, & Uzdavines, 2015](#)), and in rare cases, they may disbelieve in God(s) because of R/S struggles, though most nonbelievers emphasize intellectual reasons instead ([Stauner, Exline, Bradley, Uzdavines, & Grubbs, 2017](#)).

Theism aside, people may interpret stressful events as revealing their fate; while this may provide subjective meaning by allowing people to project their life narratives into the future, any resultant sense of doom or lack of control may do as much to threaten the sense of meaning in one's choices, actions, or efforts. Similarly, attributing trauma to bad luck (possibly regardless of whether one sees luck as supernatural) may allow one to dismiss the events' negative implications about oneself or God(s), avoid rumination, and reclaim meaning through the rest of life. Conversely, when applied to one's own success stories, good luck attributions may deprive victories of their ability to satisfy the agentic needs for achievement, power, autonomy, competence, mastery, or self-efficacy, whereas God attributions may still serve these needs vicariously through a sense of allegiance with this higher power.

This delicate question of responsibility for both the desired and unwanted aspects of one's life narrative can also become the focus of karmic attributions. Making sense of life's outcomes through belief in systems of cosmic justice such as karma can support a sense of efficacy and eschatological hope for people who consider themselves capable of living morally good lives. Yet a karmic worldview can also oppress people with both the sense of doom seen in negative fate attributions and the sense of responsibility for freely sealing their fates if they regret their past actions or believe they will continue violating their own understanding of this existential moral order.

Popular narratives about ghosts and human spirits, if not necessarily ghost attributions themselves, may also tend to reinforce the sense of responsibility and eschatological consequence in personal choice. Perceived interactions with good people or loved ones who have died may encourage a person to live well in hopes of enjoying similar privileges of

visitation or communication from what is often assumed to be a better place after death. Yet such interactions may resemble interactions with God(s), instilling a sense of supervision or compulsion by a higher moral authority. Stories of negative encounters with ghosts may also carry moral implications, as by suggesting that persons may become trapped in the afterlife by unresolved commitments or traumas. Corroborating evidence indicates that people tend to associate confined spaces with spirits of morally bad people, whereas good spirits seem more likely to inhabit open spaces (Gray et al., 2018, Jackson, 2019). These results may indicate that a fear of becoming trapped in a prison-like afterlife contributes to the existential threat of freedom and the responsibility for personal consequences that freedom entails.

While definitionally evil supernatural entities such as demons or the devil may seem less ambiguous threats to well-being, attributing suffering to demonic influences may have ambivalent implications for meaning (Harriott & Exline, 2019). (Perhaps this is also true of supernatural entities commonly conceived of as morally ambivalent or mischievous, such as jinn, nonhuman spirits, or the trickster gods of some polytheistic pantheons.) Demonic attributions may help to resolve cognitive dissonance about theodicy and personal morality by absolving both God(s) and oneself of direct responsibility for suffering (Beck and Taylor, 2008, Exline, 2017). Nonetheless, theodical concerns may include the question of the devil's existence in worldviews featuring an omnipotent creator, and demonic attributions seem similarly inseparable from human morality. Demonic attributions often raise questions of indirect responsibility: for instance, when people attribute mental illnesses (whether others' or their own) to demons, this can still lead to suspicion that the victim invited or provoked the curse (Webb, Stetz, & Hedden, 2008). Such provocation can either be framed as righteous in the sense of spiritual warfare (e.g., Exline, 2017; Tanksley, 2010) or as morally culpable in the sense of violated taboos, Faustian bargains, temptations, or other spiritual weaknesses. Aside from these moral threats to meaning, such perceived pitfalls can also pose mortal threats and similar security threats beyond death. Accordingly, attributing suffering to demonic influences has been categorized as *negative religious coping* in some of the relevant literature, alongside interpretations of suffering as divine punishment (Pargament et al., 1998, Pargament et al., 2000). Theory and research on negative religious coping featuring demonic and divine threats have recently expanded into a distinct construct domain, religious and spiritual struggles (RSS), which are the primary topic of this chapter.

## R/S struggles



The term *religious/spiritual (R/S) struggles* refers to experiences of conflict, tension, or distress that center on religious or spiritual issues (Exline & Rose, 2013). As described in recent reviews (Exline, 2013, Exline and Rose, 2013, Pargament, 2007, Stauner et al., 2016, Stauner et al., 2016), common R/S struggles can be grouped into three broad categories and six relatively narrower constructs. First, some struggles focus on people's beliefs or experiences involving supernatural entities, as alluded to in the prior section. These include *demonic struggles*, which involve perceived attacks by supernatural evil forces (Harriott & Exline, 2019) as well as *divine struggles* focused on deities, including anger at God (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011) or feeling punished or unloved by God (e.g., Pargament et al., 2000). Second, *interpersonal R/S struggles* emphasize conflicts and hurts focused on religious communities, such as anger at organized religion or feeling mistreated or offended by R/S people. A third group of struggles are intrapersonal, centered within the person. These include *moral struggles* (struggles to follow moral principles and guilt about wrongdoing), *ultimate meaning struggles* (concern about a lack of perceived meaning or purpose in life), and *doubt struggles* (feeling troubled by doubts, confusion, or questions about religious beliefs or teachings). Recently, the RSS Scale (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014) was designed specifically to tap these six forms of R/S struggle.

In the following subsections, we consider each of the six aforementioned types of R/S struggle separately. In each case, we speculate on potential theoretical relationships to Yalom's (1980) four aforementioned existential threats: mortality, isolation, responsibility/freedom, and meaninglessness.

## Divine struggle

Theoretically, divine struggle may relate to all four of Yalom's (1980) existential threats. Beginning with mortality, death can imply a confrontation with a powerful, mysterious entity. When one perceives anger in a deity, one may fear a mortal threat posed by divine wrath, and potentially further harm or suffering beyond death resulting from divine punishment.

To the extent that one fears divine anger and punishment due to one's own choices, this also implies connections between divine struggle and the existential threat of freedom. Generally, deities represent the absolute highest authorities within theistic worldviews. Their judgments often hold the most weight and may often seem unchangeable. Belief in an unforgiving God (let alone several) may exacerbate concerns about one's past choices and increase the pressure to make future choices carefully. Accordingly, a falsifiable hypothesis for future research could posit that divine struggle positively moderates effects of moral

struggle on global guilt, self-esteem, and other outcomes related to psychological well-being and distress. Projecting self-judgment onto a deity (regardless of whether this is valid) may have similar or different psychological consequences as compared to holding oneself directly responsible and feeling guilt or shame. Although these emotions seem likely to accompany any perception that a deity blames oneself, rare cases in which one rejects this blame and rejects guilt or shame in general would also make interesting topics of research. Even when one rejects divine judgment as invalid, they may have no hope of escaping its consequences and may fear additional consequences of rebellion.

While divine wrath and punishment often connote threateningly direct confrontation with God(s), people experiencing divine struggle may also feel abandoned by God(s). Feeling abandoned by a deity, particularly a monotheistic God, may imply the ultimate sense of existential isolation when one relies on that deity for guidance or validation of related worldviews. In the context of suffering (which some interpret as abandonment), perceived abandonment may feel like a betrayal when subjectively underserved, or like condemnation when one does feel they may have provoked it. Although the same issues of responsibility may arise in more confrontational experiences of divine punishment, experiences of divine abandonment may not seem to convey messages of divine reproof as clearly. If experiences of abandonment cannot be interpreted as punishment, this may effectively replace one kind of existential threat (freedom, as discussed above) with two: not only isolation but meaninglessness as well. Experiences of abandonment seem likely to violate the popular expectation that God(s) will be relationally close, responsive, and compassionate. If one cannot explain the loss of this relationship, the loss may threaten broader meaning systems that depend on one's relationship with the divine, as that relationship may often hold greater significance than others and provide life in general with meaning and purpose.

Any loss or disruption of a very important, deeply meaningful personal relationship with God(s) could cause a general sense of meaninglessness, but a third kind of divine struggle seems particularly likely to entail the threat of meaninglessness: anger at God(s). Anger at God(s) often arises through the problem of suffering, because the existence of suffering often seems to conflict with God concepts that are omnibenevolent (i.e., completely and perfectly good). Suffering may threaten meaning more when attributed to God(s) but without a clear explanation of why God(s) caused it. If people perceive anger from God(s) as the likely cause of some negative event, for instance, explaining this event as divine punishment may actually protect meaning, whereas if one has no such explanation for the event, this may lead to anger at God(s). Seemingly unprovoked experiences of hardship may violate expectations of protection among those who feel entitled to it, or these experiences may seem to conflict with the idea of divine compassion and benevolence, especially if one

does not see a way to grow through the hardship or interpret it as a test. These and other views of suffering have a dedicated measure (Hale-Smith et al., 2012) with demonstrated relationships to perceptions of God in the context of R/S struggle (Wilt, Exline, et al., 2017). Of the 10 views of suffering measured in this research, one has stood out empirically: the “unorthodox” view of God as not entirely good, which correlates positively with divine struggle and distress and negatively with well-being (Wilt, Exline, Grubbs, Park, & Pargament, 2016). Divine struggle may mediate these relationships with well-being and distress. Further research on views of suffering and divine struggle should examine whether certain views correlate more strongly with certain kinds of divine struggle, such as the retributive view of suffering with experiences of divine punishment, or the unorthodox view (i.e., denying absolute goodness) with anger directed at God(s). These different views and experiences of God(s) may then have differing implications for existential meaning, either creating mortality and freedom threats or meaninglessness threats depending on whether the observer feels they are responsible for the deity’s action or whether any other explanation is available.

## Demonic struggle

Like divine struggle, demonic struggle can imply any of the four primary existential threats. As with God(s), the supernatural power of the devil, demons, or other evil spirits involved in a demonic struggle may imply some danger to a person’s life, raising the existential threat of mortality. Furthermore, this threat may extend beyond death if one’s demonic struggle includes concerns about an afterlife, such as suffering caused by demons in an afterlife or a risk of damnation due to one’s interactions with the devil. In this sense, any interaction with demons may also pose the threat of isolation, in which one may feel distanced from God(s) or fear the loss of divine favor due to the corrupting influence of demons. Actual social isolation may occur if others view a person as corrupted by their demonic struggle; shunning and stigmatization are among the social risks associated with demonic struggle. To the extent these social risks are known or perceived, people may self-impose some degree of isolation out of fear of reputational harm rather than seeking help with demonic struggle.

Demonic struggle is a poorly understood phenomenon, and the well-being risks of misunderstanding can be substantial. Psychological research on experiences with demons is very limited and largely circumscribed within literatures on possession and psychosis. In light of historical conflicts between psychology and religions, people may fear that reporting experiences with demons to unfamiliar mental health professionals could result in pathologizing labels or the loss of personal freedoms due to unwanted psychiatric

diagnoses. These and other cultural factors may lead people experiencing demonic struggle to avoid conventional mental health services and prefer more spiritually focused assistance, but this is not necessarily the less stigmatizing option. Some tendency to attribute demonic struggle and associated psychological problems to the moral failings of the patient has been documented in Christian services, for instance ([Mercer, 2013](#), [Scrutton, 2015](#), [Stanford, 2007](#)).

Demonic struggle may often contain some element of the existential threat of freedom because of attributions of responsibility directed at the person experiencing demonic struggle. In any case where the people experience stigmatization for demonic struggle, they may internalize a sense of responsibility for bringing demonic influences into their life. They may learn to fear their own freedom if this seems to imply a risk that they will continue inviting harmful influences into their life. While this psychological process may apply even when a person does not know why they are experiencing demonic struggle (e.g., seemingly random night terrors), the threat of freedom seems most relevant to demonic struggles that are based in some experience of temptation to violate moral restrictions. In any temptation-based experience of demonic struggle, the threat of freedom is clear and heightened: a temptation implies freedom of choice, but attributing the temptation to demonic influence implies a clear judgment that a tempting option would be morally injurious or altogether wrong. Yet a temptation strong enough to cause demonic struggle also implies some risk that the person will freely choose the regrettable option; thus, theoretically, in cases of struggle with demonic temptation, freedom can become the core existential threat that entails the aforementioned others as consequences.

In addition to these challenges to existential meaning via the threats of mortality, isolation, and freedom, demonic struggle may directly cause a general sense of meaninglessness by raising the theological problem of evil. As in some cases of divine struggle, cognitive dissonance may arise from apparent contradictions between omnibenevolent God concepts and experiences of evil that seem to be caused or permitted by God(s), which may include demonic struggle if a person believes that a God created the demonic influence, allows it to exist, or should have the power to stop its influence. However, when a person does not hold God(s) responsible for demonic struggle, the belief in demons may actually help to resolve theodical threats to meaning by explaining suffering through some force other than God(s). Empirical research has indicated relatively little evidence of an overall relationship between demonic struggle and meaning in life, and even the possibility of a weakly positive relationship ([Exline et al., 2014](#)), though this may be a spurious relationship caused by religiousness.

## Interpersonal struggle

The clearest threat to existential meaning from interpersonal struggle is isolation. Since religious communities often comprise central parts of people's social networks or overlap with many other parts, conflicts that separate a person from their religious community can deeply disrupt one's sense of connection to humanity in general. In severe cases a person who is not welcome in their religious community may experience social isolation directly when excluded from religious services that have social aspects or functions. A person who leaves a religious community may also feel a more abstract loss of connection to humanity by losing their sense of religious identity, which often serves to define the ingroup and create a sense of kinship with people outside one's local community. However, recent research suggests that interpersonal struggle does not generally predict religious deidentification positively (nor do most struggles; Stauner, Exline, Uzdavines, Bradley, & Van Tongeren, 2019), so interpersonal struggle may tend to affect meaning and well-being without disrupting religious identity completely.

Future research on interpersonal struggle would do well to focus on populations that already experience unusually great amounts of social isolation or ostracism, as these conditions may increase the risks to well-being and meaning that associate with interpersonal struggle. In addition to increasing the risk of severe isolation, interpersonal struggle may lead to other existential threats indirectly through other kinds of R/S struggle. For instance, recent research indicated that people tend to perceive God's attitudes toward nonheterosexuality as more negative when they belong to religious groups with less accepting attitudes (Stauner, Exline, Przeworski, Birnkrant, & Kaminski, 2017/2018). Muslims and Hindus in the United States also reported more of all R/S struggles in one study (Stauner, Exline, & Pargament, 2015/2016), though it is unclear whether social contextual factors such as isolation or prejudice played a role in creating these differences.

## Moral struggle

The existential threat of freedom overlaps considerably with the theoretical causes of moral struggle. One might argue that moral struggle is a major mechanism through which freedom threatens existential meaning. The opportunity for choice—and ultimately the necessity of choice—leads to the assumption of responsibility for the consequences of choices. When consequences are undesirable, the burden of responsibility may lead to moral struggle.

A closely related construct is moral injury, a topic of special interest to researchers of veterans' issues (Brémault-Phillips, Pike, Scarcella, & Cherwick, 2019). The morally sensitive

and consequential nature of work (especially active duty) in the armed forces makes moral injury something of an occupational hazard for military personnel. They are exposed to morally troubling experiences at higher rates than the general civilian population and therefore have more opportunities to internalize responsibility for these experiences and feel lasting guilt about them afterward. To some extent, this is true regardless of whether a person's choices actually caused the morally injurious event or whether they merely witnessed it, but attributions of responsibility do matter. A recent study of veterans currently experiencing an R/S struggle demonstrated that those who felt responsible for their R/S struggle reported more moral struggle concurrently and over time (Wilt et al., 2019).

People with moral struggles sometimes withdraw from religious communities, whether out of fear of judgment and rejection or out of a personal sense of not belonging. An example of this process was described by Royce (1995): due to moral struggle with alcoholism, a pastor left his position and the church, lost his sense of connection to God, and also experienced ultimate meaning and doubt struggles. This case demonstrates the potential of moral struggles to cause isolation and possibly other existential threats through related R/S struggles. Connections to the threat of mortality through fear of divine punishment were mentioned previously, but according to some R/S worldviews (e.g., some karmic belief systems), the negative consequences of immoral behavior may impact a person's experiences after death independently of the actions or judgments of any God(s).

## Doubt struggle

R/S worldviews generally serve as frameworks for existential meaning, but this function may be limited by the perceived validity of the worldview. Doubts about the validity of a worldview can coexist with belief in its validity, but doubts sometimes erode beliefs, potentially reducing the ability of the beliefs to provide or support existential meaning. While doubt struggle is defined as a distressing form of R/S doubt, it is not clear whether doubt struggle actually affects the strength of R/S beliefs; doubt struggle has not exhibited consistent correlations with religiousness measured contemporaneously (Stauner, Exline, Grubbs, et al., 2016). Its ability to predict decreases in religiousness remains untested, but a test of religiousness' ability to predict change in R/S struggles produced inconsistent evidence that religious belief salience might predict increases in doubt struggle (Stauner, Wilt, Exline, & Pargament, 2017). While our understanding is thus limited by the need for further research, it seems that doubt struggle may be the kind of doubt that can coexist with R/S beliefs without tending to erode them in a strong or consistent manner.



Yet doubt struggle correlates negatively with meaning (Exline et al., 2014), which suggests that the erosion of meaning may cooccur as a cause or consequence of doubt struggle. A general loss of meaning could occur as a new, acute doubt struggle, or it could cause existing doubts to become distressing enough to prompt struggle. If doubt struggle reduces meaning, perhaps this is more of an emotional process than a cognitive one. Since there is a lack of evidence to suggest that doubt struggle interferes with belief, but a clear connection between doubt struggle and distress (Stauner, Exline, Grubbs, et al., 2016), it seems most plausible that doubt struggle would create a sense of meaninglessness through feelings of insecurity, thus disrupting the emotional, intuitive experience of meaning. In this sense, doubt struggle may represent an intuitive rather than ideological confrontation with the existential threat of meaninglessness.

## Ultimate meaning struggle

The connection between R/S struggles and the existential threat of meaninglessness seems clearest with ultimate meaning struggle. Arguably the less clear side of this relationship is the distinction between these constructs. Theoretically, meaninglessness exists as a threatening condition of existence for all of humanity (or perhaps all conscious life), but if ultimate meaning struggle is a universal phenomenon, this is not known and has not been claimed as a theoretical postulate. Research has demonstrated that many people do not report any lack of meaning; however, if meaninglessness exists as a universal condition, it may exist for many as a latent or potential characteristic of worldviews. This kind of latent meaninglessness would neither necessarily manifest in subjective experience for everyone nor lead to ultimate meaning struggle for everyone.

Research has supported an empirical distinction between ultimate meaning struggle and the subjective absence of meaning (i.e., the theoretical opposite of the presence of meaning or low end of the dimension represented by this construct;

Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Wilt, Stauner, Lindberg, et al., 2017). One known distinction between these constructs is in the definitional inclusion of distress, which only applies to ultimate meaning struggle, that is, absence (i.e., low presence) of meaning is not inherently, necessarily distressing, whereas ultimate meaning struggle is. Furthermore, ultimate meaning struggle does not necessarily indicate an absence of meaning; even people reporting the strong presence of meaning in their lives have been known to report ultimate meaning struggle. Thus ultimate meaning struggle can be understood as a subjective lack of meaning—not merely an emptiness where meaning could have existed, but some insufficiency or incompleteness of meaning that is salient and discomforting. Empirical evidence has supported the centrality of distress in the definition of ultimate

meaning struggle, consistently demonstrating that, of all R/S struggles, it has the strongest relationships with distress (Stauber, Exline, Grubbs, et al., 2016). Of course, the preceding points of theoretical distinction are not intended to downplay ultimate meaning struggle's relationship with meaning in life; it may be the only kind of R/S struggle that relates (strongly and negatively) to meaning in life independently of all other R/S struggles and religiousness (Stauber, Exline, Wilt, Lindberg, & Pargament, 2015/2016).

## Review of recent research relating R/S struggles to well-being and R/S meaning

In reviewing evidence for potential health and well-being consequences of R/S struggles, it is important to begin by noting that true causal evidence generally does not exist yet. Experimental manipulations of R/S struggles do not exist and could be ethically difficult to design, though clinical interventions are under development and have produced some success stories already (Ano et al., 2017, Pargament, 2019). Causal implications are often erroneously inferred from longitudinal results, but the assumptions needed for causal inference from nonexperimental longitudinal designs have generally not been satisfied in existing longitudinal research on R/S struggles, which is scarce. A recent study established the viability of the RSS for longitudinal research, demonstrating stable measurement properties and latent structure and moderate variability in individual differences in R/S struggles over 1 year (Stauber, Exline, Grubbs, & Pargament, Submitted). Unlike stable personality traits or fluctuating emotional states, R/S struggles exhibit an intermediate, developmental phase-like stability that balances lasting relevance with the potential for intervention, and the prediction of important changes. These results distinguish R/S struggles as a fertile domain for longitudinal and experimental research that should expand on the primarily cross-sectional research reviewed here.

Cross-sectional correlational research has established many links between R/S struggles and other constructs that are relevant to health and well-being. Given that R/S struggles focus on negative or conflicted thoughts and feelings around R/S, these constructs relate to facets of general psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety, and perceived stress (e.g., Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, & Ironson, 2015; Stauber, Exline, Grubbs, et al., 2016). Other reviews on the connections of R/S struggles to health and well-being have been published recently (Ano and Vasconcelles, 2005, Exline, 2013, Exline and Rose, 2013, Pargament, 2007, Stauber et al., 2016), so this section focuses first on supplementing these reviews with new conclusions from research that has been published since these reviews, and second on suggesting directions for future research.

A study of alcohol problems among undergraduates found positive correlations between problematic drinking and all six kinds of R/S struggles ( [Stauner, Exline, Kusina, & Pargament, 2019](#)). When testing independent predictive effects of all R/S struggles in multiple regression while controlling religiousness and distress, moral struggle was the only RSS factor that remained a significant predictor. This study highlighted the uniqueness of the relationship between alcohol problems and moral struggle, which offers a good example of the potential for reciprocal causation between R/S struggles and many problems with health and well-being. It seems plausible that problematic drinking often arises as a maladaptive coping response to moral struggle, but the problems that distinguish problematic drinking from the mere frequency of drinking (a negative correlate of R/S struggles), such as failing to meet expectations, seem likely to produce moral struggle as well. This hypothetical feedback loop between alcohol problems and moral struggle could produce the independent relationship observed in the study, but other explanations are possible as well.

In a related study of links between R/S struggles and personality traits, negative relationships with R/S struggles emerged for self-esteem and self-compassion ( [Grubbs, Wilt, Stauner, Exline, & Pargament, 2016](#)). Evidence was particularly strong for self-esteem, which correlated negatively with all R/S struggles, and for ultimate meaning, moral, and divine struggles specifically, in which self-esteem negatively predicted change over 1 year while controlling religiousness. These three struggles correlated negatively with self-compassion as well, whereas demonic, interpersonal, and doubt struggles only correlated significantly with self-esteem. A theoretically related but nonempirical chapter suggested many possible connections between R/S struggles and self-forgiveness that may inform future research ( [Exline, Wilt, Stauner, Harriott, & Saritoprak, 2017](#)). [Grubbs et al.' \(2016\)](#) study also included a less desirable aspect of attitudes toward the self, psychological entitlement, which correlated positively with divine struggle. A second theoretical chapter reviewed related research and theory on spiritual entitlement and narcissism and their connections to divine struggle ( [Grubbs, Stauner, Wilt, & Exline, 2018](#)).

Together, these conclusions suggest that self-focused aspects of the existential meaning system must maintain a sense of personal justice by balancing positivity toward the self with moderate or flexible expectations regarding what one deserves. Concepts or attitudes regarding the self that are overly rejecting or unforgiving—or conversely, those that are so strongly self-serving as to make the context of one's life seem unworthy—tend to cooccur with R/S struggles in a way that again suggests the possibility of mutual causation. Whether a person perceives one's environment as unjust, or whether a person perceives oneself as an unforgivable source of injustice, R/S struggles may result from the perception of injustice,

particularly struggles with God(s), whom people may often hold responsible for causing or correcting injustices. Existing grievances with God(s) may also lead to a sense of entitlement to compensation for one's suffering. However, a person who feels they deserve to suffer may experience a variety of R/S struggles as a result, especially ultimate meaning, moral, and divine struggles, and in turn these struggles may seem to reflect negatively on the self, mutually reinforcing the sense of existential misalignment within the self.

In further support of the idea that perceptions of right and wrong may shape R/S struggles, empirical evidence suggests that R/S struggles may mediate detrimental effects of behaviors that are not inherently unhealthy. When behaviors conflict with religious systems of morality, such as pornography use, moral struggles may arise out of that incompatibility ( [Grubbs, Stauner, Exline, & Pargament, 2016](#)). This implies that R/S struggles may constitute a primary health risk of restrictive religious meaning systems, and perhaps also a risk of stigmatized behaviors.

Most R/S struggles in the RSS relate negatively to the presence of meaning in life ( [Exline et al., 2014](#), [Stauner et al., 2015](#), [August](#)). This is less true of moral and demonic struggles for people who consider themselves spiritual; demonic struggles may even relate weakly and positively to meaning in life, particularly among people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious ( [Stauner et al., 2015](#)). Similarly, interpersonal and doubt struggles relate less negatively to meaning in life for nonreligious people; perhaps religious conflicts and doubts pose less of a threat to meaning for people who have not personally invested in religions. A separate analysis of the same dataset found that, among atheists, meaning in life only correlated significantly and negatively with moral and ultimate meaning struggles ( [Sedlar et al., 2018](#)), but interpersonal struggle also correlated negatively with life satisfaction and positively with depression and anxiety. In the atheist subpopulation, divine, demonic, and doubt struggles did not correlate significantly with well-being or distress.

R/S struggles are related to, yet distinct from religiousness, stress, and distress, both theoretically and empirically ( [Stauner, Exline, Grubbs, et al., 2016](#)). Causality in these relationships is ambiguous and probably complex. R/S struggles exhibit greater stability than mood, but less than religiousness ( [Stauner et al., Submitted](#)). Stressful life events relate to all R/S struggles positively and equally ( [Stauner, Exline, Pargament, Wilt, & Grubbs, 2018](#)), and several studies have researched R/S struggles about stressful life events such as natural disasters (e.g., floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes; [Davis et al., 2019](#); [McElroy-Heltzel et al., 2018](#); [Wadsworth, Santiago, & Einhorn, 2009](#)), where it seems clear that the events preceded the R/S struggles. However, people also report struggles about

voluntary stressful life events such as divorce ([Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011](#)), which may both cause and result from R/S struggles in various cases.

Religiousness relates less consistently to R/S struggles in general, usually predicting more demonic and moral struggles and less ultimate meaning struggles ([Stauner, Exline, Grubbs, et al., 2016](#)). These relationships may also depend partly on the religiousness of the population: we have found that religiousness relates negatively to divine, interpersonal, doubt, and general R/S struggles in a Christian university but positively to the same struggles in a relatively nonreligious university. In longitudinal analyses that combined these datasets (a necessary evil due to heavy attrition), religiousness predicted increases in moral, demonic, and interpersonal struggles over time ([Stauner, Wilt, et al., 2017](#)). In demonic and moral struggles only, religiousness explains more variance than perceived stress (a subjective measure; [Stauner, Wilt, Pargament, & Exline, 2015](#)) or stressful life events (an objective measure; [Stauner, Wilt, Exline, & Pargament, 2015](#)). When predicting R/S struggles, neuroticism explains more variance than stressful life events in all except interpersonal struggles ([Stauner, Wilt, Grubbs, Pargament, & Exline, 2015](#)).

Our studies have failed to find evidence that stressful life events interact with religiousness or neuroticism (our hypothesized buffer and diathesis, respectively; [Stauner et al., August 2015, Stauner et al., 2018](#)), but the relationship between neuroticism and stressful life events makes substantial mediated effects plausible, particularly for interpersonal and ultimate meaning struggles. Neuroticism may increase the likelihood of interpersonal stressors such as relational problems ([Côté and Moskowitz, 1998, Dermody et al., 2016, Gallo and Smith, 1999, Wilson et al., 2015](#)), which may then cause interpersonal struggles. Conversely, neuroticism may interfere with coping responses to stressful life events, increasing the likelihood of resultant ultimate meaning struggles. Further research on these causal pathways could prove especially valuable.

Cultural generalizability is another open question for future research, but existing research is supportive. Using several measures related to anger at God(s), a study of undergraduates in Southwestern India found evidence of construct validity and comparability between three Christian-majority undergraduate populations in the United States and the Hindu-majority, polytheistic-plurality population of undergraduates at the Indian university ([Exline, Kamble, & Stauner, 2017](#)). Though this study focused on cross-cultural validation of anger at God(s), it also reported evidence of a positive correlation between alcohol and drug use and anger toward God(s), but this result was limited to the context of a specific



experience of suffering and did not achieve significance regarding current or lifetime frequency of anger toward God(s).

An interesting complexity regarding anger toward God(s) emerged in exploratory reanalysis of the RSS' factor structure among Israeli–Palestinian Muslims ([Abu-Raiya, Exline, Pargament, & Agbaria, 2015](#)). Although a confirmatory analysis, if it had been attempted, might have found adequate fit for the RSS' original measurement model in this population, the exploratory approach of this study emphasized a different latent structure in the divine, demonic, and doubt items. Two new hybrid latent factors were selected to explain their covariance instead of the original three: one factor combined demonic struggle with items measuring struggle with divine punishment, while the other combined doubt struggle with items measuring struggle with divine abandonment and anger at God. These items expressing negative judgments or doubts about God or one's religious beliefs exhibited the lowest frequencies of endorsement: only these struggles with negativity or doubt toward God and religion were endorsed by less than a 10th of the sample. These results may reflect the importance of judgments about whether expressing anger and doubt toward God is morally acceptable; generally it is not in the Israeli–Palestinian Muslim population, which may suppress reports of these struggles and affect their latent structure. This study did not measure the acceptability of anger toward God, but the aforementioned study of Indian undergraduates did, and found corroborating evidence that anger toward God(s) was endorsed more by individuals that considered it morally acceptable, which most did not ([Exline et al., 2017](#); see also [Exline & Grubbs, 2011](#); [Exline, Kaplan, & Grubbs, 2012](#)). Cultural differences aside, all R/S struggles related positively to depression and anxiety in the Israeli–Palestinian Muslim population, successfully generalizing conclusions from the United States.

Research has also supported theory about R/S struggles and anger at God in a Polish population with a strong majority of Roman Catholics. The original factor structure of the RSS was confirmed in a Polish translation, as were the positive correlations between all R/S struggles and perceived stress ([Zarzycka, Ciszek, & Rykowska, 2018](#)). A study using a separate measure of religious strain found that it correlated positively with anxiety, and life satisfaction correlated negatively with a subscale specifically measuring negative interactions with religious group members ([Zarzycka, Rybarski, & Sliwak, 2017](#)). In multiple regression, this subscale and another subscale measuring religious fear and guilt (e.g., regarding sin and God's forgiveness) predicted anxiety independently and interacted with sexual orientation, such that negative social interactions predicted anxiety more strongly among homosexuals than among heterosexuals, while religious fear and guilt predicted anxiety less strongly for homosexuals. The Polish study of anger at God found that it



correlated positively with interpretations of suffering as punishment from God; this relationship was mostly independent of gender differences and effects of religiousness and God concepts (Zarzycka, 2016).

It seems that many of the concepts and correlations involving R/S struggles and well-being are generalizable or comparable across cultures, but further research that is cross-culturally coordinated is bound to reveal subtle differences. Even within the United States, cultures and demographic groups are likely to differ somewhat. A large-sample study of a six-item measure designed to identify participants with R/S struggles found differences across all demographic factors analyzed; these factors were age, gender, education, region, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and several interactions among them (Stauner et al., 2015, Stauner et al., 2016). Though the aforementioned Polish study did not find significant differences in religious strain between heterosexuals and homosexuals, homosexuals in this large US sample reported more interpersonal and ultimate meaning struggles than heterosexuals, and bisexuals reported more of all R/S struggles than both other groups. Even within Christianity, different denominations expressed varying degrees of R/S struggles: for instance, Catholics reported more of all R/S struggles than Protestants. Correlations with well-being may also differ as was established in a study of religious quest and search for meaning, which found that quest related more positively to life satisfaction and meaning in life among Catholics than among Protestants (Steger et al., 2010). In unpublished analyses, we have found positive correlations between religious quest and all factors of the RSS, so we anticipate that similar dynamics may apply to R/S struggles. Future research should take care to test for differences in the relationships of R/S struggles with well-being and meaning in life depending on demographic differences both across and within cultures.

## Potential for growth and spiritual maturity

Although R/S struggles are associated with emotional pain, they are not conceived as inherently pathological; indeed, R/S struggles may be a normal and natural part of life for many individuals (Pargament, 1997). R/S struggles may even signal turning points, representing a fork in the road where people may turn toward despair or growth in their existential, spiritual, and emotional lives (Pargament, 2007). Investigations into whether R/S struggles are associated with growth yielded mixed findings (for reviews, see Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006; Wilt, Grubbs, Exline, & Pargament, 2016). Some early studies revealed links between negative religious coping methods that signal R/S turmoil (e.g., spiritual discontent, demonic reappraisal, and interpersonal religious discontent) to positive outcomes such as posttraumatic and R/S growth (Pargament et al., 1998, Pargament et al., 2000). Other studies, however, showed links between negative religious

coping to R/S decline (e.g., [Pargament et al., 2003](#)). More recent studies found that perceived severity and difficulty of R/S struggles relate positively to secular and spiritual measures of both growth and decline ([Desai and Pargament, 2015](#), [Wilt et al., 2018](#), [Wilt et al., 2018](#)).

These inconclusive findings motivated research examining the different ways in which people adjust and adapt to R/S struggles. This work is based on the rationale that responses to R/S struggles, rather than simply the R/S struggles themselves, may catalyze growth or decline. More consistent findings have emerged from these lines of research.

One way in which people differ in response to R/S struggles is in their ability to make sense of their experiences. Though R/S struggles constitute threats to meaning, some people may be able to find reasons for their R/S struggles that make sense and situate the events in a coherent narrative, whereas for others R/S struggles may defy meaning-making processes. A recent study of undergraduates showed that there are individual differences in meaning found in R/S struggles, and people who reported higher levels of meaning found tended to experience higher levels of secular and spiritual growth, as well as lower levels of spiritual decline ([Desai & Pargament, 2015](#)). Similar results were noted in a sample of US Veterans ([Wilt, Stauner, Lindberg, et al., 2017](#)). Furthermore, higher levels of perceived meaning in R/S struggles predicted higher levels of emotional well-being in a sample of undergraduates ([Wilt et al., 2016](#), [Wilt et al., 2016](#)).

R/S variables have also emerged as consistent predictors of growth and decline in response to R/S struggles. First, higher levels of general religiosity are a robust predictor of more positive adaptations to R/S struggles across a number of studies ([Exline et al., 2017](#), [Wilt et al., 2016](#), [Wilt et al., 2016](#), [Wilt et al., 2017](#)). A second class of predictors specifically reflect perceived interactions with God. Positive perceived relationships with God, more secure attachment to God, higher levels of gratitude to God, and seeing suffering ultimately as a benevolent work of God are associated with more positive outcomes ([Desai and Pargament, 2015](#), [Exline et al., 2017](#), [Exline et al., 2017](#), [Exline et al., 2017](#)). Within Islam the concept of spiritual jihad frames R/S struggles as opportunities for growth in one's relationship with Allah; this mindset as applied to specific moral struggles predicts greater spiritual and posttraumatic growth and less distress ([Saritoprak, Exline, & Stauner, 2018](#)). Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that partnering with God in response to R/S struggle may relate to positive outcomes ([Exline et al., 2017](#), [Exline et al., 2017](#), [Exline et al., 2017](#), [Wilt et al., 2018](#)). These studies showed that religious coping methods reflecting active engagement with God and perceptions of God-initiated action are independently predictive of higher levels of spiritual growth and lower levels of spiritual decline.

[Pargament \(1997\)](#) proposed that adaptation to R/S struggles may be understood within the theoretical frameworks of the Religious Orienting System (ROS) and General Orienting System (GOS). The ROS broadly encompasses multiple dimensions of R/S resources that a person can call upon during times of duress. The ROS is one component of a broader GOS (which also includes cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social variables) that reflects one's typical ways of viewing the world and dealing with challenges. The GOS and the ROS within it are concerned not with one particular variable but the integration among various aspects of one's life ([Pargament, Wong, & Exline, 2016](#)). The strength of the ROS and GOS vary across individuals; stronger orienting systems help people to cope with stressors (such as R/S struggles), whereas weaker orienting systems may be risk factors for declines in psychological and spiritual functioning ([Pargament et al., 2013](#)). From this perspective, R/S variables that emerged as predictors of healthier adaptation to R/S struggles (e.g., higher levels of religiousness and perceived positive interactions with God) may be part of a stronger ROS, and perhaps more proficient meaning-making could be a part of a stronger GOS. A couple of the studies described above have used the ROS and GOS to generate predictions and interpret findings ([Desai and Pargament, 2015](#), [Wilt et al., 2017](#)).

## Conclusion

This chapter exhibits the importance of R/S struggles as novel constructs of interest to existential and positive psychology. A great deal of theoretical overlap exists between theory on the structure of R/S struggles and theory on the structure of fundamental existential threats, but much work remains to be done in demonstrating the empirical reality of these theoretical connections. Therefore we close this chapter with a call for continued scientific investigation of the connections between R/S struggles, meaning, and well-being, particularly with regard to causality and cross-cultural differences in these relationships. Our brief reviews of literature and speculations on theoretical commonalities and possibilities are intended to inspire and motivate the scientific growth that is needed to bridge the independent lines of research on R/S and existential well-being. In the wake of the second wave of theoretical development in positive psychology, which has too recently recognized the true complexity of the quest for healthy, sustainable happiness, consideration of the challenges inherent in R/S meaning systems will be essential to the emergence of a fully mature understanding of how R/S can affect human flourishing for better and worse.

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