



Existentially Resilient Religion

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Abstract. The current chapter examines the role of religion in providing meaning and managing existential concerns amid suffering. From the lens of Positive Psychology 2.0, I introduce the concept of *existentially resilient religion*, and offer a framework for understanding how religion can help individuals metabolize suffering, cultivate meaning, and experience flourishing amid the various seasons of life. Specifically, suffering exposes existential realities, which are often addressed through the reliance on systems of meaning, known as cultural worldviews. Religion is well-suited to address core existential concerns and provide meaning. An existentially resilient religion is positioned to help individuals navigate future suffering and is marked by acceptance rather than avoidance, a richer understanding of grief, a humble response to threatening information, a relational orientation, and pathways for transcendent connection. Over time, such a religious orientation offers a deep existential hope. Future empirical work on these topics is encouraged.

Keywords. Existential, Religion, Resilient, Suffering.

1. Existentially Resilient Religion

“There is so much stubborn hope in the human heart. The most destitute of men often end up by accepting illusion. That approval prompted by the need for peace inwardly parallels the existential consent. There are thus gods of light and idols of mud. But it is essential to find the middle path leading to the faces of man.”

—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

2. Introduction

Positive Psychology 2.0 embraces the “light” and “dark” sides of the human condition. It is concerned both with building a flourishing life of purpose and value, as well as how to endure suffering meaningfully in ways that facilitate growth and support authenticity. This admirable pursuit of a more well-rounded vision of the human condition represents a much-needed shift in scholarly efforts aimed at better understanding the dynamic nature of human flourishing. As research continues to accelerate in this area, conceptual approaches to guide future empirical efforts are necessary. One under-researched areas within this domain of scholarship is the role of religion in seeking meaning as a pathway to flourishing in the midst of suffering. Although there has been considerable research on religion, across various subdisciplines and within positive psychology, less research has focused on how

religion can help advance a more balanced view of the human condition that appreciates existential realities as a necessary component of human flourishing. Toward that end, the purpose of this paper is to examine the role of religion within the Positive Psychology 2.0 movement by offering a view of an *existentially resilient religion*.

3. Suffering as Human Universal

Suffering is a human universal. All who have lived have suffered, and depending on one's cultural or religious worldview, to live is to suffer. Myriad thinkers and most religions have long been concerned with how to make sense of human suffering. Buddhism, for example, embraces the reality that to live is to suffer, and there are features of life that inherently contribute to our suffering. Within Christianity, the first chronological book written in the Bible, was Job, a story of someone trying to make sense of senseless suffering. In Hinduism, the conceptualization of karma suggests that one's currently suffering may be affected, to some degree, by previous actions (perhaps in previous lives). Judaism views suffering as an opportunity to draw close to God, and Islam sees suffering as a test from God, to be met with submission. Religion and suffering appear to be linked.

Suffering also poses religious challenges. Adversity can undermine one's sense of meaning (Van Tongeren & Showalter Van Tongeren, 2020, 2021), and particularly senseless tragedies can expose the apparent absurdity of life. Suffering often threatens one's perception that life is fair, violating just world beliefs, and calls into question the role of the divine amidst the perpetuation of evil, sickness, and grief. These violations often reveal several givens of human existence that scholars call *existential concerns* (Koole et al., 2006; Yalom, 1980). Specifically, people must come to terms five realities that have the potential to cause considerable anxiety: *freedom*, wherein people must make decisions among seemingly attractive alternatives and bear the responsibility for their choices; *isolation*, which reveals the fundamental separation of all people where there exists an unbridgeable gap between all humans such that no one can know another's unique phenomenological experience; *identity*, which is the quest to develop a coherent narrative and story of one's life and place in the world; *death*, which the ultimate form of human limitation in the form of certain mortality and inevitable demise, and; *meaninglessness*, which is the fear that life lacks any purpose or inherent meaning and may rather be a cruel, absurd cosmic joke.

Each of these existential concerns has the potential to create significant anxiety or dread. Scholars have contended that humans seek to manage the anxiety resulting from their confrontation with these existential concerns through constructing and clinging to systems of meaning known as cultural worldviews (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). These cultural worldviews offer explanations of the origin of the world and the nature of humanity, provide a set of morally acceptable actions for right living, and set standards for laudable behavior that confer a sense of self-esteem. People rely on these cultural worldviews in the face of existential reminders as a way of managing existential terror, and they often reinforce their allegiance to these ideological commitments in the pursuit of psychological equanimity. Taken together, one may argue that because suffering exposes existential realities of being human, and cultural worldviews help mollify the

dread elicited by these reminders, the natural tendency to rely on cultural worldviews is driven, in part, by the natural experience of suffering that each person faces.

4. The Human Need for Meaning

Humans are natural meaning making animals. Demonstrating a natural, inherent proclivity to create and sustain meaning, the human brain is, in large part, a meaning-making organ (see Park, 2010). These meaning-making efforts are evident across a range of perception and cognition. For example, receiving inputs coming through our various senses, humans seemingly effortlessly translate these into meaningful conceptualizations of reality as a way to navigate the social world. Similarly, prior research has suggested that a variety of social motivations are driven by the human desire to create and sustain meaning (Heine et al., 2006). The human proclivity to view oneself and world as meaningful is a default way of engaging the world.

Previous research has contended that meaning consist of coherence (i.e., when things make sense or are predictable), significance (i.e., the feeling that one matters), and purpose (i.e., having an orientation toward something larger than oneself; George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). These features of meaning also help address core existential concerns by offering people a comprehensive worldview through which they can understand the world, draw a deep sense of permanence and value, and direct their actions (cf. Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Meaning serves an existential function.

Previous research has found that implicitly-processes threats to meaning elicit strategic defensiveness wherein individuals engage in compensatory reaffirmation of meaning as a way of regaining psychological equanimity and existential security—the defense of meaning is automatic (Van Tongeren & Green, 2010). That is, when meaning is threatened, people naturally (and often unconsciously) restore meaning by increasing their reliance of meaning-providing structures, beliefs, and behaviors. Among these compensatory responses, threats to meaning elicited greater self-reported religiousness, suggesting the importance of religion in one's meaning-making efforts (see Van Tongeren et al., in press). Religion is one of those natural responses that people turn to when their meaning undermined. Indeed, prior research has found that intrinsically religious individuals are less reactive to existential threats, including death (Jonas & Fischer, 2006) and natural disasters (Van Tongeren et al., 2021), and reminders of religion reduce death-related anxiety for the intrinsically religious (Van Tongeren et al., 2013). When religion is central to someone's sense of self, it provides insulation from the negative effects of existential threats.

5. Religion as a Meaning System

Religion is a prototypical cultural worldview that is well-designed to provide meaning and comfort in light of ultimate considerations. The religious defense of against existential concerns, such as death and meaninglessness, is powerful. Prior research has found that defensive religiousness is associated with greater meaning in life (Van Tongeren et al., 2013). Part of this association is because many religious beliefs offer promises of literal immortality (e.g., paradise, nirvana, heaven, reincarnation), which

can mollify fears of death. Indeed, prior work has found that a belief in literal immortality is associated with less afterlife anxiety because it imbues life with meaning (Van Tongeren et al., 2017). This religious meaning also helps rid one's mind of death-related thoughts, attenuating the cognitive accessibility of mortality concerns (Van Tongeren & Green, 2018; Van Tongeren et al., 2022). Some research has revealed that religious meaning is special and is often perceived as more meaningful than other meanings (Newton & McIntosh, 2013). In many ways, religion is perfectly suited to manage existential concerns.

Other work has found that *how* one is religious matters greatly. During the Ebola outbreak in the mid-2010s, research found that extrinsically religious individuals (i.e., those who identify as religion but it is less central to their identity) reminded of Ebola or their own mortality reported greater endorsement of travel-related bans and national security measures against other countries relative to those whose existential anxiety was not made salient (Van Tongeren et al., 2016). Their defensiveness resulted in harsher attitudes toward foreigners. Notably, however, this relationship was not present for those high in intrinsic religiousness. Whereas extrinsically religious individuals may be religious for social reasons or merely to reap some of the benefits of religion, intrinsically religious individuals view religion as central to their lives; it is a core part of their self-concept and orienting view of the world. Religion operates as a schematic lens through which they can make sense of who they are and the world in which they inhabit (McIntosh, 1995). Consistent with other work, intrinsically religious individuals report less existential anxiety and greater intergroup tolerance when reminded of religion (Van Tongeren et al., 2013), and report less religious cognitive dissonance in the wake of adversity (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). When religion is a central to one's sense of self, it can offer substantial existential benefits. However, individuals likely defend their worldview across a range of religious orientations.

Prior work had long found that people high in religious fundamentalism demonstrated prejudice (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Essentially, the belief in the one, true, unfailing view of reality is associated with prejudicial attitudes towards other attitudinally dissimilar groups. For example, people high in religious fundamentalism were prejudiced against atheists, people from the LGBT community, or religious outgroup members. However, more recent work clarified that people both high and low on religious fundamentalism demonstrate prejudice toward dissimilar groups (Brandt & Van Tongeren, 2017). Indeed, those holding divergent beliefs or identities that do not align with one's ideological commitments elicit more negative evaluations, and encountering worldview threats are experienced similarly across religious orientations (Van Tongeren et al., 2020). Because religion offers a robust defense against existential anxiety, people are quick to strongly defend their religious beliefs as a way of maintaining meaning and shoring up existential resources in the wake of ultimate reminders of human limitations. One central mechanism by which religion serves these vital existential functions is through the provision of meaning.

6. Religious Meaning as a Pathway to Flourishing

Thus far, I have argued that religion can be understood as way of understanding and responding to human suffering. Suffering is a natural part of being human that exposes

existential realities, and many religions offer explanations for or ways to cope with adversity in life and managing ultimate terror. To understand how this process works, it is important to elucidate the role of suffering in undermining meaning and how religion can help rebuild meaning.

Suffering undermines meaning in several ways. First, it makes existential concerns salient (Van Tongeren & Showalter Van Tongeren, 2021). Tragedy can remind people of the limitations of being human, as suffering may erode one's ability to make wise choices, increase feelings of isolation, threaten identity, remind them of death, and undermine feelings of meaningfulness. Across a range of different domains, suffering is a multifaceted threat to meaning that makes existential concerns salient. Second, when people turn toward their systems of meaning to address existential anxiety, suffering often renders such efforts ineffective by shattering the assumptions of one's worldview (Janoff-Bulman, 2010). For many, the way they assumed the world was supposed to work is not aligning with their experiences in the world, leaving them distressed and grappling for meaning to make sense of their adversity (Park, 2010). This heightened cognitive dissonance leaves them prone to significant distress and motivates a suite of responses aimed at regaining a sense of psychological equanimity in the midst of stress and adversity. Third, the nature of one's suffering often obstructs pathways toward meaning, such as straining relationships, interfering with work or leisure, and casting doubt on religious beliefs (Van Tongeren & Showalter Van Tongeren, 2020). Routes to meaning that once offered considerable comfort and powerful purpose are rendered ineffective or are less able to confer people with a sense of durable meaning. Over time, this can impair one's ability to experience authentic flourishing. In short, suffering erodes meaning, which obstructs flourishing.

Accordingly, research has suggested that cultivating meaning may be a conduit toward flourishing. A set of experiments demonstrated that following reminders of suffering, those who were able to find meaning reported lower levels of anxiety, depression, and PTSD-related symptoms, which, in turn, was associated with greater life satisfaction (Edwards & Van Tongeren, 2020). If suffering undermines meaning, cultivating meaning may be a powerful solution to finding flourishing. In concert with this, prior research has found that cultivating meaning improves one's health: to the degree that people are able to find meaning after stressful situations, they experience better immunological responses (Van Tongeren et al., 2017). Finding meaning in adversity is a key to the good life. Given the unique role of religion as a powerful cultural worldview that is well-suited to address the inherent nature of suffering and a range of existential concerns it elicits, religion may help promote human flourishing through the provision of meaning.

7. Religion as a Durable Existential Resource

To fully appreciate the role of religion in understanding the complexity of the human condition, I contend that religion is an ideal worldview for addressing existential concerns and offering meaning across situations (see Van Tongeren, 2024). It is perfectly suited to address all five existential concerns comprehensively and completely. The fear of freedom is overcome by turning toward supernatural guidance or direction,

which not only helps one perceive that they have control in their life (Kay et al., 2008, 2009), but also shifts the responsibility of the outcome away from the individual and onto the supernatural agent (cf. Gray & Wegner, 2010). Isolation, or one's fundamental aloneness in the world, is overcome through transcendent connection with a supernatural agent, who potentially who created the entire universe, and who loves and knows an individual intimately (Pinel et al., 2020). Religion offers identity by granting individuals membership to a religious group or a self-concept rooted in connection with the sacred (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Where religion truly stands alone is by overcoming the threat of death through the promise of the afterlife—be it heaven, paradise, nirvana, reincarnation, or some other way in which one's soul lives on, death is not the end (Vail et al., 2010). Finally, religion conquers meaninglessness by providing a special type of meaning (Newton & McIntosh, 2013); what better purpose than to orient one's life toward a more noble, lofty goal that religions tend to offer? Across all of these domains, religion addresses existential concerns and manages the potential anxiety resulting from engaging with the limitations of being human.

Prior research supports the assertion that religion offers existential solace in myriad domains. For example, scholarship has found that threats to control, which elicit anxiety around freedom, increase reliance on external structures, such as God (for religious people) or the government (for nonreligious people; Kay et al., 2008). Other work has demonstrated that religion can overcome existential isolation through facilitating I-sharing experiences (Pinel et al., 2020). Research has also found that religion offers a strong social identity (Ysseldyk et al., 2010), and prior work from terror management theory has highlighted how religion helps manage fears of death (Vail et al., 2010). For many, religion serves as an effective existential resource.

8. Cultivating Existentially Resilient Religion

I define *existentially resilient religion* as a set of religious beliefs and practices that authentically acknowledges the existential realities of being human while offering pathways toward meaning and flourishing in the midst of suffering. Religion is complex and multiply expressed. It can be a set of beliefs and behaviors that bond people with the sacred and offer belonging to a community, while orienting their lives around a set of moral guidelines oriented to provide a flourishing life (Saroglou, 2011; Van Tongeren, 2024). The content of religion matters—what someone believes, how they practice, the content of their moral convictions, and with whom they fellowship are all strong determinants of psychological processes. But, so too, are how people engage in their religion. The style matters as well.

Humans have dual motives for security and growth. On the one hand, humans want to feel secure, certain, and sure about their beliefs (Van Tongeren et al., 2016). But humans also demonstrate a penchant for growth and for self-expansion, going beyond certainty, and engaging the world with curiosity. Balancing these two motives is critical, and challenging. A strong focus on security feels psychologically rewarding. Holding a religious belief system with certainty that is oriented around having firm, unassailable answers to life's ultimate questions results in high meaning in life and psychological well-being; but there are some drawbacks. If one is really certain about their beliefs, they are often more close-minded and rather intolerant towards people

who differ from them. But holding religious beliefs from a growth-oriented perspective requires embracing uncertainty and doubt; the benefit of such an approach is greater tolerance. But intrapersonally, such individuals can be very anxious, often worried about death, and report lower meaning in life (Van Tongeren et al., 2016).

Achieving a balance is necessary for an existentially resilient religion. People need enough security that they're not anxious, but are enough oriented toward growth that they're not intolerant. Some clues from research offer insights on how this process. Quest religious orientation has some benefits: those who are high on quest religiousness are more tolerant toward religiously dissimilar others (Van Tongeren, Hakim et al., 2016): Christian students evaluated either Christian or Muslim targets, and those high in quest religiousness were more tolerant towards Muslims than people low on quest religiousness. However, in other work, being too open to changing one's mind about deep existential questions, such as what happens after death, erodes religious well-being (Van Tongeren et al., 2023).

Thus, religion is a dialectic. It can both help and hinder people's approach to suffering. Religion offers a resource for coping, including a strong sense of comfort and social support. However, religion can also create problems of theodicy, which is the problem of evil: If there exists an all-loving, all benevolent, all-powerful God, and something bad happens, why didn't God intervene? Is God not good? Is God not powerful? Does God not love us? Or even worse: Did God cause this to happen? Though likely oversimplifications, they might be representative of the cognitive processes occurring in the minds of many people when they're struggling with their suffering, and in turn they might feel anger toward God, or they might even feel forsaken by God (Van Tongeren et al., in press). An existentially resilient religion engages this dialectic in ways that promote flourishing.

What are the characteristics of an existentially resilient religion? In accordance with Positive Psychology 2.0, wherein the "dark" and "light" sides of the human condition are recognized, an existentially resilient religion is one marked by an awareness of existential considerations and the desire to build meaning. Such religion orientations that can hold this tension are likely to endure and provide adherents with lasting meaning across a range of situations and are resilient to adversity. Below, I briefly outline a non-exhaustive list of characteristics of existentially resilient religion.

8.1. Acceptance Rather than Avoidance

Humans possess a host of cognitive distortions that lend them to see the world as they want it to be, rather than it is the way the world is. Acceptance is likely the first key of an existentially resilient religion that permits people to metabolizing their suffering in ways that facilitate flourishing. In order to accept adversity, people likely have to allow themselves to feel the full weight of that suffering. Rather than avoid, numb, dismiss, or rush to rationalize one's pain, they must accept their suffering and emotionally experience the consequences of that adversity (Van Tongeren & Showalter Van Tongeren, 2020). Given that many religions address the inherent nature of suffering in the world, religion may offer pathways to accept suffering as regular part of the human experience, which may facilitate acceptance. Truly existentially resilient religions are ones that do not rely on thin platitudes or rush to spiritualize suffering in ways the

devalue one's experiences, but rather offer honest acceptance of one's suffering as a natural part of life.

8.2. A Richer Understanding of Grief

Existentially resilient religion can help people think about and experience grief in richer, more authentic ways. Much suffering in the world involves grief. Rather than merely a negative emotion, grief can better be understood as a measure of love. In many cases, grief is experienced when individuals experience a loss—ranging from the death of a loved one or losing a way of life that was to letting go of some future dream or expected reality. By recasting grief as an indicator of the amount of love people hold for a person, a way of life, or a dreamed of future, grief is transformed from merely a sense of loss that mired in pain to a bittersweet reminder of love. Religions can offer a sense of hope around grief, helping those who are suffering consider the deep love they hold for lost loved one or when mourning for a future, in part because religions often offer promises for a different or better reality to come. That is, many religions may offer hope for more optimistic future or reunion with lost loved ones in the afterlife.

8.3. Humbly Responsive to Revision

An existentially resilient religion is humbly responsive to revision. That is, when people encounter situations that require them to rethink their religious commitments to align with their experiences, an existentially resilient religion is one marked by an ability to change accordingly. The loss of meaning people experience in the midst of suffering is directly proportional to the discrepancy between their beliefs about the world and their experiences in the world (Park, 2010). This distressing dissonance motivates a range of responses to regain a sense of meaning. For some, they are able to assimilate the experience into their existing worldviews. But for many, when the discrepancy is too great, they must accommodate their worldviews and change what they believe. This can be a painful process, and the revision of religious worldviews can be particularly challenging (Van Tongeren, 2024). However, an existentially resilient religion involves a humble stance in which people are willing to revise their beliefs in accordance with evidence from their lives (Van Tongeren, 2022), even when doing so may come at a cost to well-being (see Van Tongeren et al., 2023). This shift will better situate people for future encounters with suffering by altering their beliefs in ways that are more authentic to their experiences.

8.4. Relationally Oriented

Religion is drawn from the root word “religio,” which means “to bind.” As such, many religions are practiced in community, and social support is often a strong feature of religion. An existentially resilient religion is one that is centered on developing and maintain high quality relationships. Relationships are the wellspring of meaning. Investing in relationships, especially in the times of suffering, can be especially valuable. Humans have a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995),

including amid suffering—this drive does not diminish when experiencing adversity. In fact, in such cases, when people may want to withdraw or avoid others in the midst of their pain, social support may be even more critical for helping people thrive. Religious communities often offer tangible help and practical support when people are grieving or suffering. Many draw hope and comfort from those in their religious circles when life feels the most challenging. The religious approaches that are the most existentially satisfying may be the ones in which relationship are prioritized, preserved, and protected.

8.5. Offering Transcendence

Although suffering can turn people inward, self-transcendence is a pathway towards meaning. When people go beyond themselves, life feels more meaningful. Religion offers numerous opportunities to engage in self-transcendence, from a sacred connection to the divine, to providing a way to be part of a larger cosmic story, or highlighting the value of virtuous or prosocial behavior, such as volunteering, doing charity work, or giving back to one's community. An existentially resilient religion is one in which there are opportunities to experience divine transcendence by connecting with the sacred. Such opportunities to go beyond oneself not only help people in the midst of the suffering, they also provide lasting ways of managing existential anxiety and coming to terms with the limitations of being human. The most existentially resilient religions may these experiences.

9. Toward Existential Hope

A full appreciation for the range of the human condition includes acknowledging suffering and striving toward flourishing. Suffering reminds people of the core existential concerns with which each person must contend. It forces them to make choices among unenviable options, reminds them of their utter aloneness and isolation from others, challenges their feelings of identity, makes mortality salient, and undermines feelings of meaning (Van Tongeren & Showalter Van Tongeren, 2021). Accordingly, it may erode mental health and usher in feelings of despair. For many, suffering is the “dark night of the soul” in which the future is bleak and hope feel lost.

However, existentially resilient religions offer a deep sense of existential hope. Beyond merely conceptualizing hope as the means and ability to bring about a desired outcome, *existential hope* is marked by (a) an honest, humble awareness of the nature of reality, (b) optimism that one's future can improve toward good, (c) participation in bringing about this longed-for reality, and (d) an appreciation of the existential boundedness that all humans face (Van Tongeren & Showalter Van Tongeren, in press). Because authentic flourishing is found when people can honestly embrace and accept the fundamental existential realities of life as truths rather than threats (Van Tongeren & Showalter Van Tongeren, 2020), an existential hope moves people toward that goal with sense of resolve and expectation. When people express existential hope, they can see the world as it is, rather than how they want it to be, and choose to put their hope in something larger than themselves to bring about a future that is both better but also

realistic, embracing that some things in life may never change, but a good, full life is still possible amid these constraints.

An existentially resilient religion may facilitate this kind of hope. Many such religions offer promises that people can change for the better, the world may bend toward justice, death is not final, and goodness will overcome evil. And regardless of the epistemic veracity of these claims (which are outside the purview of empirical science), holding such beliefs can be powerfully transformative. When suffering overwhelms and people feel lost and uncertain, many turn toward religion for a way forward, hoping for a way to make it through their adversity. Existentially resilient religions provide this sense of meaning, offering a coherent way to make sense of the world, instilling value and worth into each moment, and grant people a purpose toward which they should orient their lives. Humans are remarkably persistent and resilient—and religions can help them leverage this powerful, adaptive quality in all seasons of life.

10. Coda

The Positive Psychology 2.0 movement marks a valuable transition in the scholarship of the good life. By appreciating the full range of the human experience, it helps advance an understanding of what it means to be human and flourish, amid suffering and in the backdrop of existential realities. By better understanding the role of religion in these processes, and catalyzing research on existentially resilient religion, scholars can help promote authentic flourishing through the development of meaning by honestly engaging ultimate concerns. It is an exciting time to be studying these topics of significant import, and scholars should continue to advance work that aims to improve the lives of all people.

Author note. This chapter was adapted from a Keynote Address at the 2025 Positive Psychology 2.0 Conference in Hong Kong. Correspondence regarding this manuscript should be addressed to Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Department of Psychology and Frost Center for Social Science Research, Hope College, 100 E. 8th Street, Holland, MI, 49423, USA.

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