

The Importance of Religious Orientation and Purpose in Life for Dying Well: Evidence from Three Case Studies

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ABSTRACT. As older adults approach the end of their lives, it is not uncommon to find a decrease in subjective well-being. However, a number of studies have indicated that elders with an intrinsic rather than extrinsic religious orientation often are able to keep a high level of subjective well-being even if they are close to death. In a previous quantitative study, only intrinsic religiosity was indirectly and positively related to subjective well-being in a sample of 103 relatively healthy older

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adults and 19 hospice patients (aged 61+), mediated by shared spiritual activities and purpose in life. Extrinsic religiosity, by contrast, was indirectly and negatively related to subjective well-being. To explore in greater depth how religious orientation might influence subjective well-being at the end of life, we used the method of objective hermeneutics to examine semi-structured qualitative interviews with three older male hospice patients (aged 79, 80, and 98) on religion/spirituality and attitudes about death and dying. Results of the analyses revealed that the intrinsically religious respondent maintained his sense of cosmic purpose in life, which continued to be a source of satisfaction for him, unaffected by his terminal illness. The two extrinsically religious respondents, however, did not find solace in their religion and, hence, were unable to cope with their physical and emotional dependence and vulnerability. The findings suggest that an intrinsic religious orientation is most likely to be related to a cosmic sense of purpose in life, which facilitates subjective well-being even in the face of death. doi:10.1300/J496v19n04_05 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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As older adults approach the ends of their lives, subjective well-being might be expected to decline. A number of circumstances concomitant with aging, such as increases in physical health problems, loss of social network members to death, and decreases in levels of social activities might all be sources of lower subjective well-being (Larson, 1978). Yet, an increasing body of literature reveals that older adults do not necessarily experience a decline in subjective well-being even in the presence of negative life experiences (Ellison, 1991).

In this article, we explore how religiosity mediates subjective well-being at the end of life. Our previous quantitative research (Ardelt, 2003; Ardel & Koenig, 2006) suggests that religious orientation, through its effect on shared spiritual activities that mediate purpose in life, can have either positive or negative indirect effects on subjective well-being in old age. To explore these effects in greater depth, semi-structured qualitative

interviews were conducted with older adults in hospice care who were hypothetically within six months of death. We present three of the case studies to illustrate the relations between extrinsic and intrinsic religious orientation and the ability to deal with end-of-life issues.

INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION

An individual's religion has the potential to contribute to cognitive and behavioral manifestations that in turn might influence many psychological, social, and physical variables. For example, there has been substantial research devoted to examining the varying influences of certain religious practices such as private prayer, church attendance, and Bible study on depression, life satisfaction, physical health, and social connectedness (e.g., Ellison, 1991; Koenig, George, & Titus, 2004). Many investigations have found that understanding the influence of religion on behavior is most likely if religious practices are distinguished from religious belief systems (Fortner & Neimeyer, 1999). This does not mean that religious behaviors and religious belief systems do not interact. However, by separating them we gain a better understanding of how each is related to psychological, social, and physical outcomes.

Allport and Ross (1967) originally conceptualized religious orientation as a single construct varying along a continuum between intrinsic and extrinsic belief systems. More extrinsically oriented individuals "use religion to their own ends" (Allport & Ross, 1967, p. 434). They see religion as an avenue for attaining security, social status, solace, and social connectedness. The creed, values, or belief systems of an extrinsic's religion might be only moderately adopted or possibly even modified to meet the individual's more important personal needs. In Allport and Ross's words, "the extrinsic type turns to God, but without turning away from the self" (p. 434).

Conversely, one of the primary aspects of an intrinsic religious orientation is its power to be the major motivator for how one lives and understands one's life. Allport and Ross (1967) conceded that an intrinsic individual also might experience many other motivators in life—emotional, financial, social, psychological—but that all of these are seen as either less significant than religious orientation or they must be "brought into harmony with religious prescriptions and beliefs" (p. 434). Allport and Ross (1967, p. 434) best contrast extrinsic and religious orientations by stating that ". . . the extrinsically motivated person

uses his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated *lives* his religion” (emphasis in the original).

MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE

Because intrinsic religiosity is such an integral aspect of how an individual lives and understands life, it might be more likely to lead to a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Intrinsic religious orientation, by definition, provides an individual with a master plan for living (Allport & Ross, 1967). In support of this relationship, Bolt (1975) found that undergraduates whose religion tended to be an integral part of their everyday lives (intrinsic religiosity) reported a stronger sense of purpose in life than undergraduates who tended to use their religion for extrinsic purposes (extrinsic religiosity). Religious devotion was also found to be positively related to a sense of meaning in life among older adults (Tomer & Eliason, 2000). There is considerable evidence that a sense of meaning is positively associated with a variety of salutary outcomes including happiness, life satisfaction, general psychological well-being, and recovery from grief following bereavement (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1987; Shek, 1992; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Wong (2000, p. 26) concludes that “the common thread of . . . successful agers is that they have a zest for life and a clear sense of meaning and purpose” that includes positive attitudes not only toward life but also toward death and dying.

Moody (1986) argued that the search for meaning in late life necessitates a shift from individual concerns (or the meaning of *my* life) to exploring the collective meaning (i.e., the meaning of human life) or even the meaning of the cosmos as a whole. In doing so, the individual experiences a shift from activity to contemplation. It is possible that a strong religious commitment to a power greater than oneself might serve as the vehicle to a deeper cosmic meaning at a time when many meaning-making activities valued by secular culture—active engagement, productivity, and social interaction—decline substantially or cease (McFadden, 2000). Since religion is frequently the source for answers to existential or cosmic questions, such as what is the ultimate meaning of life and what happens after death, it can provide a cosmic order to an individual’s existence even in the presence of physical suffering, social losses, and impending death. Thus, through religious activities engendering reflection and contemplation, individuals begin to understand and appreciate

their experiences within a broader cosmic context (Berger, 1969; McFadden, 2000; Moody, 1986; Pargament, 1997).

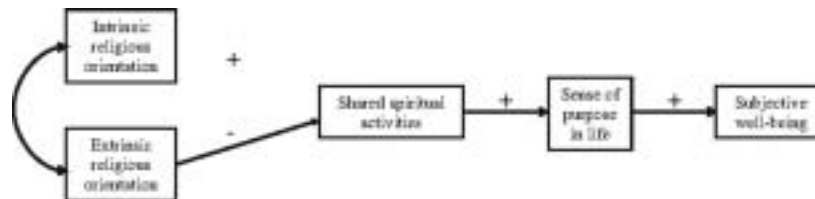
Attaining a sense of purpose in life that contributes to subjective well-being at the end of life might be more likely to occur among those individuals who have dedicated their lives to God or a higher power, that is, individuals with an intrinsic rather than an extrinsic religious orientation. Because intrinsic religiosity by definition provides an overarching context within which to consider positive and negative experiences, a sense of meaning and purpose can still be derived in the presence of social losses, physical pain, and impending death. However, the influence of religious orientation on purpose in life and subjective well-being might be indirect.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Recently, we examined the effects of religious orientation and spiritual activities on purpose in life and subjective well-being among 122 older adults between the ages of 61 and 98 (Ardelt & Koenig, 2006). This group included 103 relatively healthy older adults and 19 hospice patients with a life expectancy of 6 months or less. Interviews and surveys revealed that neither intrinsic nor extrinsic religiosity had a direct effect on subjective well-being or purpose in life. However, participants who tended to use their religion for extrinsic purposes (extrinsic religiosity) were less likely to engage in shared spiritual activities and consequently were more likely to report lower purpose in life. In contrast, individuals whose religious beliefs tended to be the major driving force in their lives (intrinsic religiosity) were more likely to engage in shared spiritual activities, which had an indirect positive effect on subjective well-being mediated by purpose in life. The results indicate that purpose in life, rather than religious orientation, might be directly associated with subjective well-being (see Figure 1). The link between purpose in life and subjective well-being is not surprising given that several investigations have demonstrated positive links between purpose in life and happiness, life satisfaction, and general psychological well-being (Krause, 2003; Shek, 1992; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). However, the processes through which shared spiritual activities and purpose in life mediate the relations between religious orientation and subjective well-being need further exploration.

Frequency of shared religious activities, such as church attendance, and a strong religious commitment are often positively associated with

FIGURE 1. Effects of Religious Orientation on Subjective Well-Being at the End of Life.



subjective well-being or life satisfaction (Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; Koenig, Kvale, & Ferrel, 1988; Markides, 1983). Shared spiritual activities might mediate between religious orientation and subjective well-being through communal worship experiences that reaffirm an individual's sense of cosmic purpose in life. It is often during religious activities with others that individuals experience the solace derived from being prayed for, the forgiveness experienced by public confession, and affirmation of a religious belief system shared by a larger community (Chamberlain & Zika, 1992). As McFadden (2000, p. 179) suggests, "In worship, the breadth of religious sources of meaning connects with their depth when religious persons affirm their own contingency in a context that assures them of ultimate meaning." In the following, we present three case studies of older hospice care patients that illustrate the relationships among religious orientation, shared spiritual activities, purpose in life, and subjective well-being at the end of life.

METHOD

Procedure

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with three older white men were conducted by the senior author in a hospice care center. In two semi-structured interview sessions, the men were asked about their religion and spirituality, attitudes about death and dying, and good and bad experiences in their lives. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To protect the privacy and anonymity of the respondents, names and some demographic characteristics have been changed.

For the purpose of this analysis, gender, race, and SES were held constant to facilitate comparisons among the three cases.

Analysis

The method of objective hermeneutics (Oevermann, Allert, Konau, & Krambeck, 1979; Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000) was used to analyze the qualitative interviews by a team of three researchers. The method consists of a sentence-by-sentence analysis, starting with the creation of as many plausible “stories” as possible about the first statement and the determination of the common structural characteristics of those constructions (“stories”). The structural characteristics are then compared with the next statement of the respondent and all constructions that do not fit are excluded. The second statement of the respondent is analyzed in the same manner as the first statement with the general structural characteristics that emerged from the first step taken into account. Constructions that do not fit are rejected and the third statement is analyzed. This sequential analytical procedure leads to a systematic exclusion of “stories lines” and to the emergence of a general (latent) structure of the case study. The case specific structure emerges when the same possibilities (“story lines”) are systematically excluded repeatedly and only one specific story line remains.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case Study 1

Hank, a 79-year-old retired investment banker, was diagnosed with lung cancer 9 months before being interviewed. He has four children (two sons and two daughters), seven grandchildren, and is married to his first wife who stays with him at the hospice care center. Hank joined the Baptist church when he was 6 years old because his “little buddy” wanted him to join and because they had “a very evangelistic-type preacher” who apparently impressed him. Although this decision shows a certain independence from his parents at a very young age, Hank now says, “I didn’t know what I was doing.” As an adult, he continued to be active in church as a member and Sunday school teacher. Hank supports his church financially, prays twice daily, but no longer attends church.

Hank has studied different religions and has a mature religious understanding expressed in an independence from his church leaders. In fact, he makes it clear that his disagreement with the minister rather than his illness is the main reason why he stopped going to church. "I don't want him [the minister] to ever downgrade another religion. No matter what your beliefs are, because everyone of them that I've studied in—we're all trying to get to the same place." Yet, Hank's religiosity is more extrinsic than intrinsic. He does not ask God to give him the strength or solace to go through his last stage of life. He claims he is not afraid of death and knows that death is inevitable but he is impatient for its arrival. When asked how much his daily life is influenced by religious or spiritual beliefs, he responds, "I pray about twice a day. Of course I pray to die. But we can't get it over, but I'm guessing the good Lord decides if He wants to get it over, He'll get it over." To the question "What does God mean to you?" Hank replies: "He's a power greater than myself. He controls everything. He's mighty hard to understand."

Hank sees God as powerful and controlling rather than loving and protecting. He does not have an intimate relationship with God. God is the universe's manager and as such His decisions are sometimes incomprehensible. When asked about the meaning of life, there is a long pause before he answers, "It is living! . . . Life is living and living is not, is *not* laying here in this bed and having to have somebody wait on everything that I do . . . Right now, what am I living for?" This answer emphasizes the importance of an independent and active life but lacks a spiritual reference. Hank is unable to accept his dependency. He sees himself as a doer and since he cannot fulfill this role anymore, life has become meaningless. Hank cannot imagine there is anything meaningful left to do in his condition, except taking care of mundane things, such as finances, for his wife's sake. When asked "What do you think you were living for when you were still healthy?" the following exchange occurs:

Hank: Oh. I was living to make some more money, to buy some more stock. Buy a little real estate. . . . Just everything.

Interviewer: But do you think that's the meaning of life?

Hank: That's right. It gives you something to get up for in the morning.

Interviewer: To be active, to do something?

Hank: Yes.

Interviewer: So how about now?

Hank: I've got no reason to live.

For Hank, the meaning of life is working and making more money. Neither family, religion, nor spiritual issues are mentioned. Because his illness has robbed him of the opportunity to work and the energy to make money, he feels that life has become worthless. Although he reveals some self-insight when he says, "I think I spent too much of my time considering everything on its numerical value," he does not follow through with this. He does not use his dependence as an opportunity for reflection and life review. Hank is unable to tap his religiosity to find meaning in his illness and dependency. This results in despair rather than ego integrity and wisdom, which Erikson (1964, p. 133) defines as ". . . detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself." Hank cannot see any reason for his illness but is afraid that God might punish him now for his past deeds. He says:

I don't know. I don't know whether I'm getting a payback for all the bad things I've done in this world. . . . Why me? I've got—I'm still questioning. [Interviewer: You haven't found the answer?] I don't think I ever will. But I do hope I find it pretty quick. Because I have no desire to live in this world any longer like this.

Hank does not appear to be on a spiritual quest. Although he cannot find any meaning in his present situation, he does not intend to wait until he finds an answer. He does not like to be dependent, so his solution is to die rather than confront existential questions concerning the meaning of suffering. When asked, "How would you like to die?" he answers "I'd like to have a gun and step out there in the yard and blow my brains out." Suicide is not an option, however, not for moral or religious reasons, or out of concern for his wife but "because they stole my gun." As an alternative, Hank appears to be hastening his death by asking for large doses of morphine to ease his breathing. This has the added benefit of allowing Hank to avoid contemplating the existential meaning of his current situation. In fact, the interview cannot be continued during subsequent attempts because Hank is unable to concentrate due to the effects of morphine.

For Hank, religion is not a way of life but rather a cultural and intellectual event. He sees himself as an independent manager and businessman whose usefulness on this earth has expired. Like every efficient manager, he wants to get rid of the faulty parts—in this case himself—as quickly as possible. He has no patience to wait for death. Because his wife has seen to it that suicide is not an option, he tries to numb himself with morphine until death comes naturally.

Case Study 2

Paul is a 98-year-old retired minister who has had a serious heart problem for about 5 years and is recovering from a broken ankle when he is interviewed. He has three children (one daughter and two sons) and is widowed for about 10 months. Paul was raised in a religious Methodist home. He explains,

My oldest uncle had been a clergyman. My family really always expected me to go into the ministry, but I went to college and was captain of the debate squad for four years and the Dean of Law at the University of Georgia offered me a scholarship, which made me doubt it for a while, but then I went into seminary.

Although Paul felt that becoming a clergyman was not necessarily his “calling,” he became a successful Methodist minister, building new congregations and rising in the hierarchy of the church. Interestingly, despite his professional success, Paul’s religiosity seems to be more extrinsic than intrinsic. Although Paul believes “. . . very profoundly in the gospel and in the work of the Holy Spirit in one’s life” and credits the guidance of the Holy Spirit for his success, his ministry continued to be more a job than a calling. Now, at 98, he has truly “retired” from religion and barely engages in any religious activities. The following exchange illustrates this:

Interviewer: Are you still doing Bible readings in the morning or Bible study in the morning?

Paul: Well, I don’t really do anything anymore.

Interviewer: Do you do anything religious during the day?

Paul: No, I’m not able to get around at all.

Interviewer: How about praying? Do you pray?

Paul: Yes.

Interviewer: On a daily basis?

Paul: Yes, but not nearly as much as I did when I was active.

Interviewer: . . . Do you watch religious programs on TV?

Paul: No.

Interviewer: So it's more private, what you are doing now?

Paul: Yes. Just closing down.

Paul is able to “retire” from religion because he considered it to be a job, exchangeable with any other kind of job. His religion appears to have been more a professional source of meaning for his life rather than a cosmic source. One can only retire from the ritualistic aspects of religiosity, not from its intrinsic or spiritual aspects. A spirituality that transcends this life cannot be closed down, particularly not when one prepares to disengage from this life. The question “What does God mean to you?” reveals Paul’s ambivalence about his faith.

Paul: Well, I guess He’s the central force in life. I imagine if our belief is correct, that He controls everything eventually. I’m not sure our belief is correct.

Interviewer: What do you believe, personally?

Paul: Well, in recent years I’ve become more agnostic than I was when I was active in the ministry. I feel that we really don’t know.

Interviewer: We don’t know, yeah.

Paul: Right. And there’s some huge, huge, huge problems that I can’t contend with. I don’t understand how you can have a heaven that gets filled with millions of people year, year, year, year, year after year. I don’t anymore comprehend that, so I am really more agnostic than I used to be. I didn’t have time to ask myself questions.

Ironically, Paul was so busy in his professional life in the church that he spent little time developing his spiritual understanding. Paul states that he only began questioning the doctrines of his church three or four years ago. Even though he maintains nothing triggered his doubts, it coincides with a time when his wife of over 60 years became ill and moved into a nursing home.

The existential questions he is asking now, at the age of 98, reveal a very literal understanding of heaven and religiosity. Because he is not searching for spiritual transcendence (Tornstam, 1999), the logical impossibilities of his literal religious beliefs leave him in a quandary. He can either abandon his religious beliefs or his logical way of thinking. His religious doubts have also destroyed his sense of the meaning and purpose of life. When asked "What do you think is the meaning of life?" he replies, "I don't know. I don't know. . . . When I actively, positively believed in the reality of those things, then the meaning of life was to really glorify God and live after His teachings. Now, I really don't know now. I really don't know."

Interestingly, unlike many other interviewees whose religiosity tended to increase with age, Paul's religious beliefs did not change until his mid-nineties. His childhood religious beliefs guided him throughout life and into old age. Only recently has he begun to experience a period of spiritual quest, which might account for his literal (and almost child-like) religious belief system.

Although Paul is 98 years old, he does not think "with any seriousness" about dying. He claims he does not "know anything about dying." This is surprising because one of the tasks of a minister is to give comfort to the dying and their survivors. Paul claims to be unafraid of dying "because it's a fact of life." He says, "What can you do about it? I don't care when it comes." For Paul, dying well means with as little disturbance or inconvenience as possible: "Just die. . . . I don't need any preparation for death." For Paul, dying is a natural rather than a spiritual experience for which one could prepare. He professes to a more scientific than religious view of death and dying. Paul is ready for death, preferring that death come sooner rather than later. He says: ". . . you know, you live 98 and a half years . . . why would you want to live any longer? You're not doing anything! So, as far as I'm concerned, I'm just in the way now."

Paul also detests being dependent upon others. He states, "I don't like to be a nuisance to people." This view is very similar to Hank's; only the productive, active life is worth living. A person who cannot be productive, who is dependent on others, is "just in the way." Paul does not

allow for the possibility that an unproductive, inactive, dependent life might still have meaning. Similar to Hank, Paul cannot find any intrinsic religious or spiritual meaning in the last stage of his life. He is not reflective and does not actively pursue a deeper spiritual understanding that might reveal a cosmic meaning of life, although he would have time for it now. His religious doubts occur because he has nothing better to do, but he does not welcome this time for introspection. Rather than searching for answers, he prefers having death relieve him of his doubts.

Case Study 3

Ben is an 80-year-old retired Veterans administrator who has collapsed lungs, an enlarged heart, and is reliant upon a wheelchair for mobility. He has two adopted daughters, five granddaughters, one great-granddaughter, and is a widower for 6 years. Ben is a Catholic whose father “was a very spiritual man.” Guided by his father, Ben has been involved with the church since childhood, never missing Sunday school and regularly participating in youth group activities. When he talks about the meetings of the youth groups, the extrinsic rather than the intrinsic aspect of religiosity is emphasized:

We had discussions of the Bible. We had plans, made plans for things that we were going to do at church. We had plays, we rehearsed plays and things of that nature. It was a great bunch of people, youngsters, and we always had a great time. We were serious, yet we had fun.

As an adult, Ben has continued his religious involvement. Even now, he prays daily and engages in daily Bible study with others or alone. However, his religiosity has become more intrinsic over the years. He feels that his religious beliefs have not changed much since he was young but that they now reflect a deeper spiritual understanding. He explains,

Well, I’ve had experiences, which I didn’t have as a child. I just took everybody’s word for it back then. Now I’ve had experiences that are out of this world, some of them, and so I think that it’s . . . made it a little deeper, and etched into my brain and being.

Ben’s outstanding spiritual feature is a sense of gratitude. He says, “Everything’s a blessing to me. I’m just thankful.” Ben has a personal relationship with God, in part because he feels that God has saved him at least two times from death. The first time, he was unable to join others

on a trip. The plane crashed, and everybody on board was killed. The second time, he had to allow others to take his place on a helicopter in Vietnam that was supposed to take him to a meeting. The helicopter was struck by missiles, and everyone on board was killed. He says, "I tell you, if you can't believe in God after that, then you're a goner. I just gotta believe there's a hand laid on me." Ben's image of God is that of a personal God, a father figure—not unlike his own father—who takes care of him. To the question "What does God mean to you?" Ben answers:

Everything. I believe He looks after us all. He's got the time set for us—when we come in and when we go out. I believe that I'm going to see my father and mother and my sisters and brother. When I'm gone out of here I think I'll meet with them, because I know they're good people. I'm trying to be. So I just think He is everything for every place and everybody. I'm glad that I do believe in him, because I have so many things to be thankful for. I've had some bad things happen, but they always seemed—that something good happens to replace it. I don't dwell on the bad ones.

Ben's life has not been easy. His wife had six miscarriages and suddenly developed dementia at the age of 40. His wife's sister stayed with Ben's two daughters during the day but when he came home from work, Ben managed all household tasks and helped his daughters with homework. For 25 years, Ben took care of his wife until he had to admit her to a nursing home. Ben admits his wife's illness ". . . was difficult, very difficult, all the way through. I guess that was the biggest disappointment in my life." Still, Ben maintains that ". . . it was a labor of love. No woman was ever loved more than she was." In spite of the long struggle with his wife's illness, Ben is grateful. He explains,

The most pleasant thing in my life was when I met my wife. She was only the second woman that I had a date with. And when I saw her, that was it for me. I knew immediately. But she and I had a life together that was the greatest to me, until she got sick. Of all the things that I can think of, that is the greatest. . . . She was the sweetest gal I ever knew. . . . We'd do everything together. We were together 51 years altogether. And 20 good ones.

Although dealing with his wife's illness had been a struggle for Ben, he did not become bitter or lose his faith in God. When asked "What do you think is the meaning of life?" he responds,

Well, it's an ongoing thing. We were put here for a purpose—and I don't believe that God intended for us to fight each other the way we are. I been all around the world, I've met all kinds of people, and I have never seen one that I would start a fight with. I'm a lover, not a fighter. So I believe that we are here to make the earth the best place in the universe.

Whereas Hank's purpose in life is to be active and to make money, Ben's understanding of the meaning of life is more collective and cosmic rather than individualistic: “. . . we are here to make the earth the best place in the universe.” This goal does not depend on Ben's physical mobility. It can be pursued as long as he lives and will exist even after his death.

Unlike Hank and Paul, Ben is not tired of living but looks forward to the future and to each new day. The existential meaning that he has found for his life transcends his significant disability and impending death. When Ben is asked how much his daily life is influenced by his religious or spiritual beliefs, he says, “Every day I wake up I give thanks to the Lord that I wake up. . . . because every day is a new blessing.”

While both Hank and Paul's spiritual activities are limited to solitary prayers, Ben also engages in an active spiritual social life that includes watching Bible stories on video with others followed by communal Bible readings. Through those shared activities he not only receives social and spiritual support, but also a confirmation of his religious beliefs. Yet, Ben's focus is not on his impending death or even on life after death. He explains,

If it happens, it happens, but if it don't, it don't. That's my philosophy. I could sit here and worry myself to death, but I don't see the point. I quit worrying about 55 years ago, about anything. I found out that was the most useless thing you can do. It didn't help put the subject you were worrying about—does nothing to—but it gave you an ulcer and then you do have something to worry about.

Ben realized early in his life that worrying does not help to solve a problem. Although this insight in itself is not remarkable, it is astonishing that he was able to act on it. This again exemplifies his trust in God and his belief that God will take care of him. Even though Ben does not dwell much on the topic of death and dying, he is comfortable talking about it, and he is not afraid of death. He considers it “. . . as normal as any other subject.” He says,

I'm ready to go when He [God] calls me. . . . We all have to face it. I'm not worried one bit about it. . . . It's something that's going to happen and in my philosophy of not worrying about anything, why should I worry about that? . . . I'm not going to be afraid at all to go.

Ben is a very joyful and grateful person despite of all the hardships he endured in his life. He says, "I had a great life." When asked about the pleasant and unpleasant things in his current life, he replies, "I enjoy anything and everything. Everything's good, nothing is bad." Yet, he does not cling to life but is ready to let go when his time comes.

CONCLUSION

All three respondents professed some religious beliefs. However, only an intrinsic religious orientation, as manifested by a deep religious commitment, led to a cosmic sense of purpose in life, which helped Ben to cope with issues related to the dying process in old age. By contrast, extrinsic religiosity, that is, a religiosity that was practiced for extrinsic purposes, such as intellectual stimulation, to increase one's standing in the family or community, to earn a living, or simply out of habit, provided no support in dealing with physical and emotional dependence and vulnerability at the end of life. Although both Hank and Paul continued to pray, neither of them had the desire to participate in religious activities with others, which is particularly astonishing for a former minister. Hence, their spirituality was not nourished by external support. An extrinsic religious orientation also did not provide an existential and cosmic meaning that transcended their terminal illnesses and advanced disabilities. Whereas Paul's extrinsic religiosity had led him to develop existential and spiritual doubts in his nineties, Hank's purpose in life was firmly rooted in individualistic and secular goals. Even though a lack of cosmic meaning did not seem to increase Hank's and Paul's fear of death, it did affect their subjective well-being at the end of life. Neither of them perceived any reason for living and both wished to be dead rather than alive.

Ben's intrinsic religious orientation, on the other hand, seemed to protect him from emotional despair despite being equally physically dependent on others and with a similar terminal diagnosis as the other two respondents. He continued to engage in spiritual activities alone and with others, and his collective and cosmic sense of meaning in life—to

love others and “make the earth the best place in the universe”—transcended his physical limitations and terminal diagnosis. As a consequence, Ben was grateful for each new day but also ready to die when his time on earth should come to an end.

Analysis of the three qualitative case studies confirmed our prior quantitative findings that an intrinsic but not an extrinsic religious orientation is positively related to subjective well-being at the end of life (Ardelt & Koenig, 2006). The qualitative analysis also illustrated why frequency of prayer was unrelated to subjective well-being in the quantitative study. All three men engaged in daily prayer, but for Hank and Paul prayer appeared to be more a habitual ritual than a conversation or communion with God, although it should be noted that we did not ask the men explicitly about the content or form of their prayers. Still, it is clear from the qualitative interviews that Hank and Paul had a more distant and probably more ritualized relationship with God than did Ben. Both Hank and Paul understood God as the central force in life that controls everything yet is hard to understand, whereas Ben believed that God is a personal father figure who looks after us all. Hence, daily prayer by itself did not help Hank and Paul to deepen their spirituality and find meaning in the last stage of life.

Finally, the qualitative analysis demonstrated the importance of a collective or cosmic sense of meaning for subjective well-being at the end of life. Although, the correlation between a sense of purpose in life and well-being was positive and relatively high in the quantitative study ($r = .53$; $p < .001$), the purpose in life scale did not distinguish between individualistic, collective, and cosmic meaning in life. By contrast, the qualitative case studies showed that an individualistic sense of meaning is unable to sustain subjective well-being at the end of life. Yet, due to the small sample from which these case studies were drawn, the role of religion near the end of life should still be considered exploratory.

The differential relations between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation and subjective well-being might explain why some studies that examine the impact of religion/spirituality on well-being in old age produce contradictory or inconclusive results (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Koenig et al., 1997; Walls & Zarit, 1991). The three case studies presented offer an opportunity to consider how religious orientation might be related to dying well through its relation to shared spiritual activities and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Although some practitioners might assume that discussing issues related to spirituality and life meaning would be beneficial when counseling dying patients (e.g., Kirkham, Pesut, Meyerhoff, & Sawatzky, 2004), these case

studies demonstrate that an individual's intrinsic or extrinsic religious orientation tends to impact the usefulness of such approaches. Further research is needed to explore whether it is possible to offer spiritual programs to extrinsically religious older adults that encourage the development of an intrinsic religious orientation and a cosmic sense of meaning in life and, hence, better prepare elders for the challenges of coping with physical disability, dependency, and ultimately the dying process.

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