

Running head: DOES RELIGION FACILITATE WELL-BEING

NOTE: Subsequent to writing this paper, Maslow's *Toward a Psychology of Being, Third Edition* was read. In that, Maslow added an additional level of actualization, *transcendental actualization*. It is also of note *Varieties of Religious Experience* is referenced

Is Religion a Pure Good in Facilitating Well-Being During Adulthood?

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Religion is a word with many meanings. To provide a basis for discussion, I will define religion as “living in accordance to a formal set of values involving reliance on some form of universal power beyond human understanding.” This embraces a wide variety of formal religions including those based on Hindu as well as the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. It is also intended to include religions based on nature, whether or not personified. The latter is often found in Native American practice (Nerburn, 1999). The values may be personal, not those of an organized group. The key concepts are set of values which are principles to live by, and reliance on a power beyond human understanding.

As to the question: “Is religion a pure good in facilitating well-being during adulthood,” I immediately question the word “pure.” The essence of humanity requires impurity. The glory of the human mind is the incredible variety of its impurities. Having noted that, I will review the two given viewpoints, one by David G. Myers, the other by Julie Juola Exline. Both confine their discussions to Christian denominations

David Myers' essay, *Wanting More in an Age of Plenty* (Myers, Ed. Guest, 2011), is so seriously flawed that it is almost a waste of time discussing it. Myers speaks about the lack of racial prejudice in Christian denominations. I note that the news of the resurrection of Jesus, the defining event in Christianity, was delivered by Mary Magdalene, a woman of ill repute (Mt. 28:1-10, Revised Standard Edition). I would ask why a woman was acceptable in this role but would not be allowed to serve as a minister in most Christian churches? I would also suggest that it stretches credulity to dismiss destructive actions like the Crusades and Inquisition done by Christians in the name of Christianity, because of the good Christianity has done. But to praise a group of Christians for hiding Jews during World War II is beyond the pall. The wanton murder of millions of human beings was done with the tacit approval of Christian Churches and their

members. Had Christians refused to be a part of this crime, over 8,000,00 people would not have been killed. Indeed the level of hypocrisy shown in Myers' essay makes questionable whether Christians “live in accordance with a formal set of values” sufficiently to be included in my definition of religion.

On the other hand, Julie Juola Exline in her article, *Stumbling Blocks on the Religious Road: Fractured Relationships, Nagging Vices, and the Inner Struggle to Believe* (Exline Ed. Guest, 2011), looks at the impact these inconsistencies can have on those who embrace Christianity. Like Myers she focuses her discussion on Protestant Christianity. She notes that stress can be caused by doctrinal disagreement among family members. They may even occur within the social community of a denomination. Most powerfully she deals candidly with the anger, mistrust and frustration individuals may feel when faced with life's ultimate questions. She sites several studies. This view is also supported by, *Spirituality, Religion, and Depression in the Terminally Ill*, Nelson, Rosenfeld, Breibart, and Gallietta (2002). They found some correlation between regular church attendance and increased depression. While Exline points out many problems, she also finds much positive value that religious belief can bring. In sum, her's appears to be a reasonable and balanced account of the issue. Exline notes she is unaware of significant psychological studies prior to recent years. This surprises me as William James left a major work on the subject.

In *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1902), James shows huge emotional changes in human lives through profound religious transformation. The cases are documented with written testimony. In most cases the transformation is sudden, but St. Augustine is shown as an example where it took several years. So, as James sees it, time is not crucial. His cases consistently show spiritual rebirth through Christian principles but he explicitly stated that he felt

the Buddhist tradition could produce equally powerful results. He regretted he did not have sufficient knowledge to document this. However, while endorsing the spiritual transformative power of religion he explicitly excoriated organized religion. He found it an impediment.

Ultimately his theory is that humans have an innate desire to find a way to achieve an altered state of consciousness and this can be achieved through religious experience. I'm inclined to accept James' theory. It certainly deserves a great deal of exploration as his cases clearly show the beneficial psychological impact possible. And in fact, *Varieties of Religious Experience* formed a crucial part in the development of a significant spiritual movement in the 20th century.

Ernest Kurtz, a Harvard historian, documents the events whereby James' work through Sam Shoemaker, an Episcopalian Priest, became the *Twelve Steps of Recovery*, first published in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* (Anonymous, 1939; Kurtz, 2008). These are routinely accepted and used by professionals specializing in addiction. They meet my definition of religion. They follow James' thinking in explicitly rejecting all denominational affiliation. But despite their strengths I would not accept them as unflawed. Ultimately only a small percentage of those who attempt them succeed the goal of continued abstinence. This mandates a great deal more formal study.

I find it interesting that Abraham Maslow in *A Theory of Human Motivation* (Maslow, 1943) stops just short of religion when he reaches the stage of self-actualization. He acknowledges William James as one of those providing the basis for his thinking. As *Varieties of Religious Experience* is not one of his citations. I wonder if, like Exline, he was unaware of it.

Like James, I think consideration is owed to Eastern religious tradition, especially Buddhism. As noted there is evidence that when the end of life is known to be approaching, Christian principles may fail to be effective in dealing with depression (Nelson et. al., 2002).

Buddhist thinking views death as a part of life, something to embrace not fear (Powers, 2007)). For this alone, I think further study is warranted. Also not discussed are either the Judaic or Islamic parts of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. There are significant differences in both which warrant investigation (Wright, 2009).

We must conclude that the answer to the question, “Is religion a pure good in facilitating well-being during adulthood” is emphatically no. But there is substantial evidence that this is true more by virtue of the implementation than limitations in the underlying principle. First and foremost I would suggest exploring the psychological differences between Eastern and Western religions. Second I would study the strengths and weaknesses of the approach articulated in the Twelve Steps. Both seem to have a strong formal set of values without embracing elaborate doctrine. As between the positions of Myers and Exline, Exline clearly offers a reasonable and balanced view.

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