

Searching for Meaning: An Encounter with the Sacred in Our World

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Abstract

One main way that science and religion are intimately connected is that both are systems by which individuals make meaning out of their existence. It has been argued that both science and religion offer an encounter with the sacred, and it is through this process that personal meaning is born. The current paper explored further the assumption of the search for sacred as meaning. The teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria, a renowned Kabbalist and contemplative teacher, are reviewed in light of discovering a spiritual view of the bond between the creation of the world and the Divine expression of integrated meaning. By searching for meaning, humans are engaged in a primary cause for the existence of the world. In a theistic contemplative fashion, individuals who are engaged in the process of meaning formation are following in God's footsteps – a sacred act. The perspective of living a life of service is explored as the ultimate source of meaning, for the Divine and for humans. The reason for this is because service fulfills all the requirements for meaning – value, purpose, efficacy, and self-worth – and the spiritual qualities of transcendence and immersion are also available.

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Religion as a Unique System of Meaning

In the field of psychology, religion is not only seen as a source of meaning, but is actually a meaning-system (Silberman 2005), as it can fulfill the basic needs of meaning. One classification of these needs has been purpose, self-worth, efficacy, and value (Baumeister 1992). Religion is based on beliefs that allow people to make sense of the world around them and their experiences. These beliefs also shape goals, expectations, and behaviors. Thus, parallel to a meaning system, it is comprised of beliefs about the self, the world and the interaction between the two. Epstein (1985) wrote that meaning systems developed in order to maintain a sense of stability and coherence in a person's conceptual framework, to balance favorably between pleasure and pain, to balance favorably the concept of self-esteem, and to ensure a perception of a favorable relationship with a significant other. These functions seem to be part of the role of religion as well.

Unique to religion, is that the focal point of the system and the significant relationship to be deemed favorable is that of a transcendent and sacred Higher Power, or God. With the Divine at its center, religion creates unique contingencies and concepts that are foreign to more secular meaning systems. Silberman (2005) gave the example of the religious precept that righteous

people should be rewarded, and the sinner should be punished. Religion, like other meaning systems, can be learned, developed and changed. Religion can also be an individual and a collective meaning system.

Bridging Science and Religion through the Sacred

Firestone, Firestone and Catlett (2003) explored the relationship between science and religion. They concluded that as science becomes ever more pervasive in explaining world phenomena it is becoming more difficult to justify and argue for religious explanations. Furthermore they predicted that spirituality – the experience of connection with the sacred – will become more reliant on secular sources than older religious mythologies. A key point is that seeking the sacred is accessible through diverse channels, in which religion and science are two equal pathways.

Pargament, Magyar-Russell and Murray-Swank (2005) expanded the idea of the sacred to include anything that is separated out from its normal context and established as a symbol for the Divine. This definition fits well with the concept of *kadosh* in the Hebrew language, as it represents a process of taking out a piece from the whole, thus bestowing upon that object a quality of uniqueness to the one making the separation. For example, we see this in the act of *kedushin*, the marriage ceremony, where in the traditional practice, the man will ritually select a woman to be only his and she becomes special unto him (Kehati 1998a).

Pargament et al. (2005) listed the following as sources for the sacred: material objects, time and space, events and transitions, cultural products, people, psychological attributes, and roles. These all may be completely secular in nature. Very similar to this is Wong's (1998) work on identifying the implicit meaning that people identify as intrinsic to specific categories of elements in their daily lives.¹ The expansion of the sacred to include the secular prevents the total reduction of spirituality to neurobiology (Pargament et al. 2005) or to other psychological constructs such as social support (Ciarrocchi 2007), or meaning making (Firestone et al. 2003).²

It is clear from the above exploration that meaning and spirituality are intimately related. There is also a theoretical resistance arising from the psychology of religion camp to collapse spirituality completely onto meaning making. As we will explore further, there may be a way to understand the search for meaning as the search for the sacred. We will conclude that spirituality and meaning-making are not simply parallel processes, but that the sacred being present in this world is the primary motivator for the search for meaning. First let us further flush out the connection between spirituality and meaning.

Connection between Spirituality and Personal Meaning

A major component of personal meaning is that of goal direction (Emmons 2003). While important, goal seeking, or what we do, does not paint a complete picture of personal meaning (Baumeister 1991; Wong 2008). While society seems to be focused on the meaning that one receives through their work and other physical accomplishments, there is a second side to the meaning coin that seems to emerge mostly in times of ultimate despair (Jacobson, Luckhaupt, Delaney and Tsevat 2006). This is the personal meaning that is connected with human dignity and is intrinsic to simply being alive (Miller and Keys 2001).

Frankl (1984), who brought meaning to the attention of interdisciplinary scholars after his psychological analysis of his experience surviving the Holocaust, wrote that there is a facet of meaning that is uncovered and ever-present in a person's existence that is related to the spiritual quality of transcendence (Firestone, Firestone and Catlett 2003). In contrast to the focus on goal setting as a facet of meaning, Ebersole and Quiring (1991) wrote,

“Many of people's meaning that we have studied have either a minor goal directed aspect or lack it entirely; for example, a majority of those who subscribe to relationships with other people as their most central meaning are referring to already established relationships. We suspect that such a statement could be difficult for individuals in our goal-oriented culture to accept. They might question whether there can be meaning divorced from a goal orientation. We side with the alternative argument ... that sometimes the meaning in life is not found in striving but just being” (p. 115).

The authors' idea of meaning as being is drawn from the work of Yalom (1980) who wrote about meaning that comes from the Hedonistic Solution. In this view, purpose in life is to “simply live fully, to retain one's sense of astonishment at the miracle of life, to plunge oneself into the natural rhythm of life, to search for pleasure in the deepest possible sense” (p. 437). Yalom seems to hold the view that a person must invent their own meaning and then to commit oneself to this self-created meaning. Perhaps because of this view he reduced the sentiment of simply being to the idea that pleasure seeking is the highest goal in life. Yalom seems to draw from Heidegger's empty 'God is dead' approach to being (Kaufmann 1975).³ There are, however, alternative perspectives on being that keep the sacred intact. (For example see Kaufmann (1975) on Sartre.)

Vietnamese Zen Buddhist master, Tich Nhat Hanh (1998), touched on a similar idea minus the reduction of meaning through being as purely a pleasure pursuit. He wrote, “For those who have truly seen, there is no philosophy of action needed. There is no knowledge, attainment, or object of attainment. Life is lived just as the wind blows, clouds drift, and flowers bloom. When you know how to fly you do not need a street map. Your language is the language of clouds, wind, and flowers. If asked a philosophical question, you might answer with a poem ... Or point to the mountain forest” (p. 105).

Here one gets a similar idea of which Yalom (1980) spoke about, the meaning of simply being, though without the association of pure pleasure seeking. In the phrase, “There is no knowledge, attainment, or object of attainment,” Hanh (1998, 105) seems to be speaking about the realization of unity between the perceiver and the perceived. With this mindset, one would not strive to be what they already are, and meaning is never elusive. By revisiting Frankl as cited in Yalom (1980), this Buddhist view is expressed in Western terms.

Yalom (1980) alluded to three types of meaning systems: creative, experiential, and attitudinal meaning. In reference to experiential meaning, Yalom wrote, “Engagement in deep experience constitutes meaning: ‘If someone tapped your shoulder while listening to your favorite music, and asked you if life were meaningful, would you not,’ asks Frankl (1984), ‘answer Yes? The

same answer would be given by the nature lover on a mountain top, the religious person at a memorable service, the intellectual at an inspiring lecture, the artist in front of a masterpiece””(p. 446).

Meaning then is also perceived when in a state of being totally immersed with your surroundings, or that which you are engaged in. The experience of expanding beyond the boundary of self is perhaps a signal of a moment of achieved or discovered meaning. Clearly, Firestone et al. (2003) seemed correct in identifying immersion and transcendence as the two common denominators connecting meaning and spirituality.

Meaning Making as Motivator for Creation

From the teachings of the 14th century Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, we learn that the reason God created the world was to enable Godself to not merely be God in potential, but to be a God manifested. Specifically, Rabbi Luria taught, that it was God’s desire to display God’s perfect benevolence that motivated creation (Halpren 1983). Because of this, according to the Kabbalistic teachings, one of the first manifestations of Divine will in the creative process was to establish directions, both physical and intentional. The initial purpose of creation was that of loving kindness and giving, from the Divine source to mankind. God, as Rabbi Luria expounded, created this world as a realm in which God could serve.

Integrating what we have already learned about meaning above, one could argue that in this Jewish mystical view of creation God created the world in order to integrate the meaning of God’s being with action and manifestation. In a sense the creation of the world is the Divine search for meaning. Creating and sustaining the world is a continuous source of purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth for the Divine. These are all fulfilled by God taking on a role of service to provide for all created beings. Furthermore, the creation of the world has provided God with the opportunity for transcendence and immersion.

By creating the human sense of a separate consciousness God manifested the concept of the other into being. With the existence of the other, God could play the role of having to be concerned beyond simply God’s own being. God also, through creating the world, created a container for which God could immerse Godself into an infinite number of experiences. Within this world God was able to ensure a pervasive integrated sense of meaning through doing and being.

Encountering the Sacred through Personal Meaning Integration

When looking at the existential question of the ultimate purpose of a human life, religion, and specifically here, Judaism, does offer an answer. Rabbi Chaim Moshe Luzzatto (1999), in his seminal work *The Way of God*, wrote that the purpose of the individual in this world is to cleave to the Divine. Cleaving to God is achieved when one is able to discern what contains or represents godliness and acts accordingly. The role of the individual in this perspective is to distinguish what is sacred in the world around them and to engage in that which is identified as sacred. As was discussed above, the sacred may be encountered in a multitude of ways that might involve physical objects, specific time frames, or intentional activity. Thus if cleaving to

God is engaging as much as possible in God related worldly interactions, then meaning making, as discussed above as the primal Divine fulfillment in the world, should certainly take center stage as sacred engagement. It may even be argued, that meaning making is the sacred core that exists and unites science and religion which are often pitted against one another as opposites.

As was discussed previously, in the wisdom of Jewish mysticism, God integrates God's meaning through being (as a benevolent God) with God's meaning through doing (by bestowing good) through engaging with the world in service to the world. Therefore, when an individual aligns their personal meaning with service they are modeling Divine purpose. The personal meaning that is manifested and integrated in service is a sacred interaction and an encounter with the Divine.

In the Mishnaic work, Ethics of the Fathers, *Pirkei Avot*, chapter 3:3 (Kehati 1998b) we read that when two people study *Torah* together, the Divine Presence rests between them. Studying *Torah* is seen as the ultimate example of service because it not only serves God, but also serves the world by allowing a person to better develop their character, thereby creating an individual who is closer to the Divine ideal (Luzzato 1999). The teaching of the Mishna exemplifies that an act of service in the world is an encounter with the sacred. It is a cleaving to the Divine by imitating the Divine purpose of finding meaning through being and doing integrative activity. In the Eastern tradition of Yoga, a similar service-based path of spirituality and sacred encounter is taught as Karma Yoga (Iyengar 1976). Furthermore, there is a similar underscore to the various Eastern practices of meditation, whereby an individual works on their own liberation in the greater context, or meaning, of ending the suffering of others (Chödrön 2003; Hanh 1991). This is a clear union of Divine and human will coupling in order to perfect the world.

On Empirical Terms

For the empirically minded the argument of this paper can be explored in terms of the relationship between the variables of faith maturity (FM) and purpose in life (PIL). The FM Scale (FMS) (Benson, Donahue, and Erickson 1993) measures the extent to which an individual is living according to precepts of faith. The FMS is divided into two subscales. The vertical subscale looks at how one relates to a transcendent being and the horizontal subscale looks at how one relates to others in acts of service. PIL, most commonly measured by the scale developed by Crumbaugh & Maholick (1964), looks at the extent that one experiences a sense of meaning in their life.

In a study conducted by Dy-Liacco, Piedmont, Murray-Swank, Rodgeron, and Sherman (2009) it was found that FM predicted PIL over and above measures of personality. Their results suggested that a person who is living a life that is oriented toward the sacred will experience a sense of purpose regardless of their personality configuration. The argument above is challenging this view and suggesting that a more complex model is required, as it can be theorized that having meaning causes a person to live with a sense of faith and service. While bidirectional models are more difficult to test quantitatively, it would seem that for FM and PIL a more complex model would be crucial in order to capture the relationship between the two variables (Dy-Liacco et al. 2009). An alternative paradigm with which to observe the complex relationship between the sacred and meaning is through a qualitative paradigm. For this reason,

the author will be conducting a dissertation study on the relationship between the sacred and meaning through the qualitative lens of narrative analysis.

In Conclusion

To review and summarize the argument of this paper, we see that meaning making is an integral part of encountering the sacred in our world. The search and formation of meaning can be seen as an extension of the Divine intention for creation. Through acts of service, which materialize our potential meaning into manifested meaning, individuals mimic the Divine and thus engage with that which is sacred. Meaning making then, whether through science, religion, or any other meaning system, is a sacred act itself and potentially imbues any life with the sacred. To date, empirical models seem to fall short from capturing the complex relationship between the search for the sacred and meaning-making.

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1 Through mixed quantitative and qualitative methods Paul Wong (1998) developed the Personal Meaning Profile scale. It measures from where and to what degree an individual draws meaning from eight different categories. Its eight subscales are: (1) achievement and goal striving (agency), (2) intimacy and family (love), (3) relationships (community), (4) self-transcendence (larger cause), (5) religion (spirituality), (6) self-acceptance (maturity), and, (7) fair treatment (justice and morality).

2 Religion and spirituality, as psychological constructs, have been historically under siege as there is a continued attempt to explain away phenomena associated with both of them. The work of the Pastoral Counseling department of Loyola College in Maryland, and similar programs, has been to produce and test empirical models that show that religion and spirituality provide researchers with unique predictive value in understanding human personality and behavior. See Dy-Liacco, Piedmont, Murray-Swank, Rodgeron, and Sherman. (2009).

3 In this view, there is no ultimate source of meaning or entity which bestows meaning. Thus, humans are left to create their own meaning out of their own convictions. Opposed to this view, Sartre spoke of being that precedes existence, thus one's own being could provide unlimited access to meaning. A similar view is the religious view, in which a Divine source provides humans with an access to meaning.