

Chapter Seven



THE MANY FACES OF RELIGION IN COPING

This chapter examines how people involve religion in the search for significance in the face of pain and hardship. I will begin by noting how and why it can be so difficult to apply religious beliefs and practices to the concrete problems of living. Next, I will examine how religion expresses itself in many ways in coping, ways that belie popular stereotypes about religion. Finally, I will consider some of the individual, situational, and cultural forces that shape the many faces of religious coping.

FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH

“The prince of darkness may be a gentleman, as we are told he is, but whatever the god of earth and heaven is, he can surely be no gentleman. His menial services are needed in the dust of our human trials, even more than his dignity is needed in the empyrean” (James, 1975, p. 40). James’s turn-of-the-century observations seem just as appropriate today. We have seen that many people look to their faith for support and solace in difficult times. Yet many also find it hard to translate the often abstract, seemingly removed historical accounts of the religious world into concrete forms that are meaningful to their current predicaments. Listen to this description of a couple having marital difficulties:

During one argument, the husband confronted the wife and asked what she thought they should do about the marriage, what direction they should take. She reached for her Bible and turned to Ephesians. "I know what Paul says and I know what Jesus says about marriage," he told her. "What do you say about our marriage?" Dumbfounded, she could not say anything. Like so many of us, she could recite the scriptures, but could not apply them to everyday living. Before the year was out, the husband filed for divorce. (Jones, 1991, p. 4)

This is not an isolated case. One of the most common complaints about churches and synagogues is the irrelevance of the religious services and educational programs to the problems of daily life (Pargament et al., 1991). Even the most devout may have trouble applying the abstractions of religion to life's hardships. In psychotherapy with clergy it is not at all unusual to find ministers, priests, or rabbis who fail to connect their faith to their specific problems.

When religion is disconnected from matters of practical importance it is unlikely to have much practical effect. In one study of homilies within Roman Catholic parishes, we found that the relevance of the sermons to daily life was by far the best predictor of the impact of the message on the members (Pargament & Silverman, 1982).

I recall one clergyman who came to therapy in a great deal of distress after suffering an accident that had left him paralyzed. The accident raised many fundamental questions for this man. Why had it happened? Could he have done anything to prevent it? How could he continue to function with his disability? Could he ever find enjoyment in living now that he truly knew how fragile life is? Yet in all his talk about these very basic issues of meaning, responsibility, and finitude he never mentioned a word about religious faith. Perhaps he was reluctant to bring up religious concerns to a psychologist. But when I raised the question of where his religion fit into his struggle, he drew a blank. In spite of the fact that he often worked as a religious counselor to people in dire straits not unlike his own, he himself was unable to move from the generalities of his faith to the specifics of his situation.

Why is it so hard to bring religion down to earth? The problem is, in part, built into religious systems. The religions of the world are vitally concerned with the most important of the human transitions and crises. Every major religious tradition has something to say about birth, the coming of age, the forming of new families, illness, accident, injustice, tragedy, and death. Most of the world's religions offer theologies and rituals for these general classes of events. However, no organized religion can provide a theology for every kind of death that could be experienced.

None is able to offer rituals predesigned and tailored to every kind of loss.

But, if no religion is fully elaborated, it is with good reason. A faith too tied to the specifics of a particular time, context, or situation would grow extinct as circumstances evolve. The symbols, rituals, and metaphors so central to religious life all lend it flexibility—an ability to bend, stretch, and generate new forms of expression with changing times and conditions. Moreover, the incomplete character of religion can add freshness and vitality to the spiritual search (Bakan, 1968).

The religion of any particular time and place is faced with a difficult dilemma. If made too concrete, it will lose much of its flexibility, mystery and vitality. Yet if left too abstract it will have little to say to the person confronted with very immediate and very real problems. Theologians are quite aware of this dilemma. The essential function of theology, Tillich (1951) says, is to create a balance between two poles, “the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received” (p. 3). A theology that confuses the truth of the moment with eternal truth is as untenable as a theology that is disconnected from present circumstances.

The leaders of religious communities also deal with this dilemma in the more concrete practice of religious life. In fact, perhaps their major task is to bridge the mysteries of the heavens with the realities of earth. In sermons, religious stories, inspirational literature, and pastoral work of many kinds we find the fundamental truths of a religious tradition linked to the situation of the day. Take a few examples.

A minister responds to an abused woman who wonders whether she deserves the treatment she has received:

You are valued in God's eyes; your whole self is regarded by God as a temple, a sacred place. Just as God does not want a temple defiled by violence, neither does God want you to be harmed. God's spirit dwells in you and makes you holy. You do deserve to live without fear and without abuse. (Fortune, 1987, p. 7)

A rabbi likens the Ten Plagues inflicted on ancient Egypt to the plagues facing the world today.

The final and ultimate (of the Ten Plagues) was the loss of Egypt's first-born children and thus the calling into question of its future. As the Jewish community grapples with the issues of a low birth rate, intermarriage, alienation and assimilation and Jewish illiteracy, it must

remember that the ultimate plague is that which destroys our future as a community. (Berkowitz, 1989, p. 14)

In any age and in any community, we find the basic teachings of a religious tradition confronting the unique demands of a particular time, place, and people. The challenge for the religious community is to respond to ever-changing circumstances while remaining within the boundaries of its world. This is the “cutting edge of religious life” (Paden, 1988, p. 89).

Psychologists of religion have had less to say about this cutting edge of religion. As we noted earlier, the tendency among social scientists has been to view religion as a general orientation. Typically, religion has been assessed macroanalytically by global, dispositional, distal indicators: how often the person generally attends religious services or prays, how important religion is to the individual. The applications of religion to concrete life situations have gone largely unstudied. Unfortunately, this has left a gap in our understanding.

Take, for example, a study of caregivers to people with Alzheimer’s disease and recurrent metastatic cancer (Rabins, Fitting, Eastham, & Zabora, 1990). Recognizing that caregivers of the chronically ill are vulnerable to emotional and physical problems of their own, these researchers were interested in identifying the factors that affect long-term adaptation to the caregiving process. Religion emerged as one of the most important and helpful variables. More specifically, the strength of religious faith reported by the caregivers was related to a more positive emotional state 2 years later, as measured by indices of positive and negative affect. Although this study points to the beneficial role of religious faith for these caregivers, it leaves some very important questions unanswered. What is it about religious faith that is helpful? Does it reassure them that their relative will recover? Does it help them view the illness in a more positive light? Does it provide them with direction and guidance in their struggles? Does it enable them to find meaning in what may seem to be a senseless disease? It is not enough to find that general measures of religious faith or practice relate to general measures of adjustment or well-being. The central question remains: How does religion come to life in the immediate situation?

The coping framework provides one window into this transitional process, this movement from heaven to earth. When we turn our attention to coping, we can see people moving from the generalities of their faith to the specifics of religious action in difficult moments. We now consider some of the ways religion expresses itself “in the dust of our trials.”

BEYOND STEREOTYPES

When psychologists talk about coping, the topic of religion does not usually come up. What discussion it has received has often been oversimplified and negative. The view that religion is simply a defense against the confrontation with reality, argued by Freud (1927/1961) many years ago, still holds wide acceptance among social scientists and mental health professionals. For example, one text on stress devotes one page to religion, and focuses exclusively on its defensive role in the appraisals of situations:

Religion actively offers distortions of perception as “acceptable” ways of dealing with problems, and in many ways the comments made about the use of drugs in altering cognitive appraisal are appropriate here. Although emotional gains obviously accrue from being religious, there is a distinct possibility that the psychological defense strategies recommended by the religion may impair realistic behaviour, and may only be maintained at a cost to physical and psychological health. (Cox, 1980, p. 120)

What does it mean to say that religion is a defense? The term “defense” refers to a particular set of means for attaining a particular set of ends (A. Freud, 1966). By distorting the nature of the real threat or by steering clear of it (i.e., the means or methods of defense), the individual attempts to allay fears and apprehensions (i.e., the ends or goals of defense). Avoidance in the service of tension reduction is the essence of this concept. Defenses are said to be partially successful and partially maladaptive. They may reduce anxiety, but in failing to face the real issue head on, the problem remains unresolved.

Implicit in the view of religion-as-defense are three assumptions: (1) in terms of ends, the basic goal of religion is tension reduction; (2) in terms of the way situations are constructed, religion is a form of denial; and (3) in terms of the way situations are handled, religion is passive and avoidant. Elsewhere Park and I (Pargament & Park, 1995) have argued that these assumptions and the general notion of religion-as-defense are stereotypical. Like other stereotypes, there is a grain of truth to these beliefs, but only that. Religion can serve the purpose of tension reduction, it can distort reality, and it can be passive and avoidant, but it can also be more. In the introductory chapters, I defined religion as a complex multidimensional phenomena. Religion is no less complex or multidimensional when it comes to coping. In the following sections I challenge common religious stereotypes by presenting pictures of some

of the many faces of religion in coping: in the ends we strive toward, in the ways we construct situations, and in the specific forms of coping we use in the search for significance.

Merely Tension Reduction? The Many Ends of Religious Coping

In the eyes of many mental health professionals, comfort, solace, and relief are the basic functions of religion. Similarly, some coping researchers have described religion exclusively as a form of emotion-focused coping. It is not too hard to marshal support for this argument. As we saw in the last chapter, people are more likely to turn to God for help in stressful times. And, as we will see in Chapter 10, religious involvement can allay feelings of anxiety and distress among groups in crisis. However, to say that people look to religion for emotional comfort in times of stress is one thing; to say that this is the sole purpose of religion is quite another.

Earlier we described some of the general destinations often associated with religion. We spoke of religion and the search not only for comfort, but for other ends as well: the sacred, meaning, the self, physical health, intimacy, and a better world. In the process of coping with stress, each of these general destinations turns into specific purposes.

People may strive toward something of a spiritual nature.

One of our interviewees in the Project on Religion and Coping (Pargament, Royster, et al., 1990), Jane a 41-year-old woman, described a lifelong search for God in the midst of exceptional hardship and struggle. As a child she had a deep spiritual feeling: "I can remember one instance in particular when I was about four or five when I was sitting in a field behind our house, and the sun was going down, and I just felt like God had his arms around me. I can see him in the sunset, and I can remember seeing him in that field." As an adolescent, Jane had a born-again experience. However, it was a "reverse success story." "I thought that when I became a Christian, when I asked the Lord into my heart, that I just [would never] do anything wrong again. That somehow I'd be transformed into this perfect little person. . . . And so, the first time I screwed up, I thought, that's it, I blew it, and had nobody to tell me any different." Jane's life went into a downward spiral. She became addicted to heroin, was involved in a series of unsuccessful marriages, and participated in witchcraft and the occult. All of these actions she viewed as misdirected attempts to recover the God she had lost.

The death of her mother was a turning point. At her funeral, Jane was profoundly affected by something a friend said to her:

That when Jesus said, I will never leave you or forsake you, he meant it. That once you take this step, once you step over this line and ask me to come in, then I'm always there with you. . . . And boy, that hit me right between the eyes. I felt like that was written for me. And when she told me that, I just thought, my God, he's been there with me this whole time. He never left. From the moment I asked him into my life, in 1972, Jesus has been standing right by me. (Pargament, Royster, et al., 1990)

Although Jane now feels she has found God, she believes that her spiritual search continues through her efforts to experience God in her daily life. Toward this end she has dramatically changed her lifestyle. Jane reports that in the past 10 years she has returned to her hometown, quit her use of heroin, established a new network of friends, remarried successfully, and become active in personal religious devotions and her church.

Looking back over Jane's life, it is clear that she struggled with many crises. However, it would be misleading to say she simply coped *with* her problems, for her coping was quite active and purposeful. She coped with her situations to rediscover the spiritual presence she had once felt as a child.

Religion is also often involved in the search for very human ends of significance in coping. Comfort represents one of these ends, but it is not the only one. Consider, for instance, the varied accounts of survivors of the 1995 bomb blast in Oklahoma City that killed over 100 adults and children (see Table 7.1). In their words, we hear people faced with the same event looking for help in attaining diverse objects of significance.

It is important to recognize that the dividing line between the search for comfort and other human and spiritual ends is not necessarily sharp. Many personal, social, and spiritual goals can become intertwined. For example, in a Roman Catholic priest's description of his mother's funeral, it is hard to separate the spirituality of the moment from the feelings of intimacy, connectedness, and comfort with family and friends:

The funeral was astounding. It was one of the highest moments of my life. It was incredible. The church was jammed. . . . The whole church, everybody was there. Many, many friends were there. Students from here, and the liturgy was a real experience of the resurrection. It was terrific. My blind niece played the piano. And I'll never forget those

TABLE 7.1. Objects of Religious Significance Described by Survivors of the Oklahoma City Bombing

Spirituality

“There has been so much loss that I’m holding on tighter than ever to my faith, my rituals, my God. For me, if I lose my faith, I lose everything.”

Meaning

“We all have been paralyzed, dazed, wondering why, and there are a lot of unanswered questions that I’m not able to answer. But there’s a God that knows all things and I’m convinced the Lord is not sitting up there in heaven trying to figure out how to handle things. He’s already in control.”

Comfort

“We don’t know whether she’s alive. We don’t know what happened to her. We do know she’s with God.” (Parents of daughter missing in the blast)

Self

“You had to depend on a spiritual background to conquer the frontier, and in the tough times we faced in the Dust Bowl days, there was no strength but the Lord.” (Commenting on the gritty, empowering Grapes of Wrath legacy passed on to Oklahoma City survivors)

Physical health

“The prayers here won’t necessarily put this behind us, but it helps us to heal.” (Man who attended a prayer service on behalf of a friend who lost his eye in the explosion)

Intimacy

“There’s a spirit that bonds people together that’s not a human spirit but the Holy Spirit.”

Better world

“I’m working on forgiving those responsible [for the bombing]. Peace and justice is what we [parishioners] are fighting for. [I’m] vowing not to give in to hate.”

Note. Accounts of Oklahoma City survivors from television interviews and newspapers.

psalms. And my best friend David gave the homily. Absolutely on the nose homily. . . . So there were so many powerful religious expressions and family expressions. (Pargament, Royster, et al., 1990, pp. 14–15)

The accounts we have reviewed here have been anecdotal and self-report. Some would say that people are unable to know or report accurately on their own motives in coping. Others would say that these reports are simply different ways of describing the same basic defensive motive. But if these personal accounts are to be believed, then we should be wary of reducing the ends of religious coping to any single universal

object of significance. Instead, we should be alert to the many ends people seek through religion as they face their ups and downs of living. Tension reduction is an important end of religious coping, but it is not the only one. In the next chapters, we will bring more data to bear on the variety of religious ends and pathways people take toward them.

Merely Denial? The Many Religious Constructions of the Situation

One of the most common stereotypes is that religion is simply a form of denial, a way to reduce tension by repudiating reality. That is one way religion can be used to construct life situation, but it is not the only way. Religion can shape appraisals of critical events in other directions as well. Moreover, it can shape the events people actually encounter and avoid in their lives.

Appraising Life Events

Examples can always be found to support stereotypes. This holds true for the stereotype of religion-as-denial. Take the case of a 32-year-old man convicted and serving time for several theft and robbery offenses. Asked to describe his past, he says, "Since I got Jesus I don't have no memories of the past" (Peck, 1988, p. 207). Or consider the case of Baby Boy William, a premature neonate, who suffered from a variety of ailments (York, 1987). His condition deteriorated to the point where his kidneys stopped functioning and he could be kept alive only through artificial means at the cost of a great deal of physical suffering. The parents, however, refused to accept the bad news. "God will make William well and the Doctor will be proven wrong. . . . God is smarter than all doctors and will save our son" (p. 38). In the face of his evident decline, the parents refused to visit their son in the unit and came to the hospital only reluctantly when he was near death. Even then, however, they insisted that "William still has a chance and we expect a miracle" (p. 39). After he died, the parents left his body in the morgue for a few weeks before the arrangements for the funeral were made.

A few empirical studies have also reported a connection between religiousness and denial among some groups. In one study of fundamentalist patients suffering from terminal cancer, people who experienced higher levels of support from the church were more likely to deny the reality of their illness and the imminence of death (Gibbs & Achterberg-Lawlis, 1978).

Blatant examples of religiously based denial can be found. However, it is one thing to find instances of religious denial and quite

another to conclude that religion is simply a form of denial. Evidence from other sources contradicts this unidimensional point of view. Some anecdotal accounts describe a God who helps people face the reality of their losses. One mother of a visually impaired child had this to say: "I wish my son could see, but he can't. God taught me to accept that fact, deal with it, and get on with life" (Erin, Rudin, & Njoroge, 1991, p. 161).

Empirical findings are also hard to reconcile with the stereotypical view of religion as denial. In a study of people who had reported at least one "consensually validated" life-threatening experience, Berman (1974) found that the religiously active group described as much initial anxiety, panic, or fear in reaction to the near-death experience as the religiously inactive group. Others have reported similar results (e.g., Acklin, Brown, & Mauger, 1983; Pargament, Olsen, et al., 1992b).

Certain religious beliefs may increase rather than decrease appraisals of threat and harm. For example, in one study of stressful reactions to the Persian Gulf war, religious faith was associated with more intrusive thoughts and dreams (Plante & Manuel, 1992).

Neurologist Oliver Sacks (1988) illustrates the same point in his description of David Janzen who, at the age of 15, began to feel compulsions to hurt himself, break things, and shout out obscenities. This kind of behavior, particularly the cursing, did not sit well with his conservative Mennonite community. At a loss to explain his actions, David concluded that the Devil was at work in him. When he cursed he would say, "Devil! Why don't you get out of me and leave me alone?" (p. 97). David's symptoms grew more severe as he aged. Finally, at the age of 38, he met a physician who diagnosed his problem as Tourette's syndrome. Serious as this disease is, the diagnosis came as a relief to David: "It made me want to jump for joy. . . . It took away the terrible feeling of a curse. It was not the Devil working in me—which was my worst fear—and it was not medical doom. I had a simple disease, and it even had a name. A pretty name too—I kept on repeating it." (p. 98)

This account brings to mind once again the words of Clifford Geertz (1966): "Over its career religion has probably disturbed men as much as it has cheered them" (p. 18).

Studies of the religion–appraisal connection are few in number as yet. What we do know, however, suggests that religion does not always decrease perceptions of threat and harm. Denial is one way religion expresses itself in the appraisal of negative events, but it is not the only way.

Much of religion's power lies in its ability to appraise negative

events from a different vantage point. Crises become an opportunity for closeness with God. Moments of terrible tension become a way to test and hone one's spiritual mettle. Suffering and failure become a chance to redress one's sins and achieve redemption. Even the most desperate situations can be appraised in a more benevolent light from the religious perspective. Consider the advice evangelist Billy Graham offers a man in constant pain who complains that his suffering makes it hard for him to think about God: "Throughout the ages there have been countless saints of God who have found that pain and sickness became a blessing instead of a barrier. They found it could actually help get life into its true perspective. . . . It may seem hard to thank God for your pain. But ask God to teach you whatever He wants of you during your lifetime" (cited in Kotarba, 1983, p. 683).

Empirical research also suggests a link between religiousness and positive appraisals of situations. Wright, Pratt, and Schmall (1985) studied the role of religion in the coping efforts of caregivers of people with Alzheimer's disease. One of their central findings was that caregivers who looked to religion for spiritual support in coping were more likely to define their demanding situation more positively. One of their participants put it this way: "It is the most rewarding and devastating experience of my life; I would not have given up this period to care for my parents for anything. There has been combativeness, wandering—lots of frustrations. But I'm learning for the first time to take each day at a time. This illness is teaching me to gain strength from the Lord" (p. 34). Other researchers have also reported relationships between measures of religiousness and appraisals of the "silver lining" in negative situations (e.g., Carver et al., 1989; Weisner, Belzer, & Stolze, 1991).

Of course, it could be argued that positive appraisals of difficult situations are simply more sophisticated, better camouflaged efforts to deny the pain of the negative. There is, however, some evidence that positive reconstructions of negative events are not tantamount to denial. In a study of cancer patients, Yates, Chalmer, St. James, Follansbee, and McKegney (1981) found that measures of religiousness were not related to reports of the *presence* of pain among patients. They were, however, related to reports of lower *levels* of pain. Similarly, in the Project on Religion and Coping, although global measures of religiousness were unassociated with appraisals of situations as a threat or as harmful, they were associated with appraisals of the events as an opportunity to grow (see Pargament, Olsen, et al., 1992b). More often than not, these findings suggest, religion places negative events in a positive sacred context without denying or distorting the fact that a fundamental change has taken place.

Creating and Avoiding Life Events

The stereotypical view of religion-as-denial also assumes that religion is largely reactive to problems. Religion is said to respond to stressors with denial and distortion. Overlooked in this stereotype is the role religion plays in the construction of some events and in the avoidance of others.

In the search for the spiritual, the world's religions have marked off the most critical junctions of the lifespan, setting them apart from ordinary times and wrapping them in religious garb. Oden (1983) captures the special sense of these "holy-days" from a Christian perspective:

There are five incomparable days in the believer's life. The day one is born, when life is given. The day one is baptized, and enters anticipatively into the community of faith. The day one is confirmed, when one chooses to re-affirm one's baptism, and enter by choice deliberately into the community of faith and enjoy its holy communion. The day one may choose to enter into a lifelong covenant of fidelity in love. The day one dies, when life is received back into God's hands. (p. 85)

Through its association with religion, the event is fundamentally changed. The ritual circumcision of the infant within Judaism is something other than a medical procedure. A wedding within the Anglican church is not to be confused with a civil ceremony. Here, rituals and beliefs are more than window dressing; they add gravity and deeper meaning to the event, thereby altering the nature of the transition itself. This may help to explain the intriguing finding reported by Idler and Kasl (1992). Mortality rates among elderly Christians drop significantly in the 30 days prior to Christmas and Easter. A similar phenomenon occurs for elderly Jewish males in the 30 days before Passover and Yom Kippur. Apparently, the anticipation of these religious rituals and holidays has survival implications for the individual.

While religions remake the nature of the most inevitable and universal of life's events, they also create new demands and new pressures of their own. Those involved in a religious world are likely to face some rather unique problems. One such problem arises when the truthfulness of religious claims is questioned. Kooistra (1990) studied the religious doubts of high school students in Roman Catholic and Dutch Reformed parochial schools. In this sample, 77% reported some doubts about their religion. These doubts were sources of distress in themselves. Active religious doubting (measured by the amount of time and energy spent in questioning basic religious tenets) was associated with higher levels of negative affect and anxiety.

Doubts are only one of the many unique problems and dilemmas that come with the religious territory. One person wonders how she can find a religious congregation where women are treated as equals to men. Another struggles with the fact that church leaders continually violate religious precepts. One person fights with his son who wants to marry someone outside of the faith. Another feels compelled by her congregation to remain in an abusive marital relationship. I could go on, but the central point here is that religions can create problems of their own, problems that may be especially painful, rooted as they are in a system that was expected to resolve existential crises, not engender them.

But if religions create some problems, they sidestep others. On the road map of religious paths and destinations, the routes to avoid can be drawn even more clearly than the roads to follow. They are marked by warning signs in capital letters: “profanity,” “impurity,” “sinful,” “abomination,” “taboo,” and “defilement.” The markers reveal that these paths and destinations have a sharply negative kind of religious significance of their own.

Murder, adultery, lying, stealing, cruelty, worshiping false gods—these are the ways people have traditionally strayed from the search for the sacred. The modern day continues to provide people with opportunities to take a wrong turn. Alcoholism and drug abuse, family violence, divorce, homelessness, and social and political oppression are, to many religious minds, some of the sins of our time.

Religions encourage people to avoid these paths. The encouragement comes, in part, from strong injunctions against the many forms of wickedness. One Biblical passage reads: “Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless” (Exodus 22:21–23). The reader of the New Testament hears: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18). In a portion of the Koran we read: “And lo! the wicked verily will be in hell; They will burn therein on the Day of Judgment, And will not be absent thence” (Sarah, LXXXII, 14–16).

Religious encouragement to avoid the wrong turn is also expressed socially. Organized religions can, at times, reach out, grab people by the shoulders, and guide them away from these dead ends. Take the case of the meeting between Rev. Robert Smith of the New Bethel Baptist Church and Jerome, an unemployed 38-year-old crack addict, separated from his wife and living in abandoned buildings.

One morning in July, [Rev.] Smith reeled in Jerome. . . . Smith's bait was simple. He invited Jerome to eat supper and attend a revival, and Jerome agreed. . . .

But that was far from the end of Jerome's journey. His salvation wasn't in the water that washed him; it was in the two religious communities that adopted him afterward. . . .

"This church is a safe place. The people here have reached out to me," he says. "And I'm glad for that, because in the streets where I've been, nobody does nothing for you—except abuse you and use you." . . .

It has been only four months since Jerome's baptism, but through New Bethel and Narcotics Anonymous, he is back living with relatives. He has stopped smoking crack. He is no longer committing crimes. And, as the blue book preaches, he is taking his new life one day at a time. (Crumm, 1991, pp. 8A–9A)

In addition to these informal encounters, many religious groups offer more formal activities to help people steer clear of trouble and get their lives back on track. Churches and synagogues support programs to prevent many kinds of problems, such as drug and alcohol abuse, marital distress, homelessness, and hypertension (see Pargament, Maton, & Hess, 1992, for review). These programs should not be mistaken for mental health programs. Unlike their mental health counterparts, they have a specific religious intent. Their purpose is to protect people from the sins of our times and to redirect them onto a spiritual path. But their effect is to remake the character of situations people are likely to face in living. By involving themselves in religious life, empirical studies suggest, people are less likely to face the problems of substance abuse, marital infidelity, suicidality (Payne, Bergin, Bielema, & Jenkins, 1992) and high risk sexual behavior (Folkman, Chesney, Pollack, & Phillips, 1992).

It is important to remember, however, that in the effort to avoid some problems, religions can create others. For example, while Mormons have among the lowest rates of alcohol use of any religious groups, those who do drink report a high rate of alcohol abuse (Strauss & Bacon, 1953). Those who break the strict religious code against drinking may lack the knowledge of how to drink sensibly or may feel they have gone too far to turn back. Thus, even though the religious injunction may prevent alcoholism among most people, the same injunction may be the source of problems for those who have transgressed. In this sense, Payne et al. (1992) note, religion becomes "a two-edged sword, deterring

alcoholism and alcohol abuse, but resulting in greater abuse when the 'rules' have been broken" (p. 70).

Let me summarize. While religion is often described as a way of denying the painfulness of life, I have argued here that religion constructs situations in many ways. It is just as capable of increasing perceptions of threat and loss as decreasing these perceptions. It is also able to do more than react. It can remake the topography of life experience, dotting the landscape with some events and removing other features from the map. Once again, simple stereotypes cannot do justice to the roles of religion in the construction of the situation. The same point applies to the concrete methods of coping.

Merely Avoidance? The Many Methods of Religious Coping

People do many things with religion in stressful times. Consider, for example, the variety of ways one group of people reportedly coped religiously with the ordeal of waiting in the hospital for their loved ones who were about to undergo major cardiac surgery (VandeCreek et al., 1995). Their responses ranged from reading the Bible, watching religious television, and reciting sacred phrases to a period of quiet prayer, a conversation with clergy, and a religious ritual. Religion provides its adherents with a long list of coping options. While this list illustrates the varied sources of religious coping, it does not say much about the coping methods themselves. How, for instance, is the individual praying? What is he or she praying for? There are, after all, many forms of prayer (see Poloma & Gallup, 1991). Similarly, what kind of religious television is the individual watching? What portion of the Bible is being read? What is the individual searching for through a conversation with clergy or participation in ritual? Bare-bones descriptions of religious activities say little about the roles of these activities in the coping process. For that, we must go beyond description to a more functional analysis of religious coping.

Here we encounter another stereotype. In the attempt to reduce tension, this stereotype holds, religion resorts to inappropriate measures. As one reviewer of the field observed: "The psychological research reflects an overwhelming consensus that religion . . . is associated with [among other things] an array of what may be called desperate and generally unadaptive defensive maneuvers" (Dittes, 1969, p. 636). More specifically, religion has been accused of acquiescence and lethargy in response to stress. How accurate is this view? Is religion simply a passive, avoidant approach to solving problems?

Just as we can find examples of religiously based denial, we can

find illustrations of religiously based passive and avoidant coping activities.

I remember a young woman, Ellen, who came in for counseling after discovering that her husband had been having an affair with her best friend. The mother of four small children, unemployed, and distant from her family, Ellen was naturally enough uncertain about her marriage and her future. Adding to all of the confusion was the fact that her husband had asked her to return home; unfortunately, he refused to promise that he would stop seeing the other woman. After the initial session, Ellen agreed to return and try to sort through some of her questions and conflicts. Later the next week, though, she called me in a much cheerier voice saying a miracle had occurred to her over the weekend. God, she said, had come to her in a dream and told her to return to her husband. The following day Ellen went home to a joyous reunion with her spouse. Although her husband had made no commitment to end his affair, Ellen was confident that God would change him. In spite of my strong encouragement that she return to counseling, Ellen declined. Passivity and avoidance were central to the way she coped with her dilemma. These strategies were not without their advantages. By deferring to God, she was able to relieve herself of the responsibility for her very difficult decision. Not only that, by returning to her husband and trusting that God would show him the light, she neatly sidestepped both the threat of single parenthood and the threat posed by "the other woman." But the immediate gains associated with her passive-avoidant way of coping were purchased at great cost to her personal sense of competence and any chance of salvaging her marriage as well.

It is not hard to locate other clinical examples. In support of these clinical accounts, a few studies have tied various measures of religiousness to escapist forms of coping (Dunkel-Schetter, Feinstein, Taylor, & Falker, 1992; Rosenstiel & Keefe, 1983). Acceptance, resignation, deference, avoidance, forbearance, and submission can be important elements of religious coping. They are not the only elements, however.

There is more to religion than avoidance of pain. Rofe and Lewin (1980) surveyed the daydreams of Jewish high school students from two towns in Israel. One of the towns had been subject to a number of terrorist attacks; the other town had not. In both towns, the more religiously orthodox and traditional students had more Messianic daydreams than the secular students (e.g., I daydream of the rebuilding of the Holy Temple). However, they did not experience any fewer unpleasant daydreams. Religious students were as likely as secular students to visualize the people of Israel again being in exile, see themselves or their

parents dead, or imagine themselves choking someone. These religious individuals did not appear to avoid the pain of their situations to a greater extent than their less religious counterparts. But they did seem to have another source of support and relief for themselves in their stressful circumstances.

There is also more to religion than submission; religion can express itself through active as well as passive coping approaches. For example, Horton, Wilkins, and Wright (1988) used questionnaires to compare the coping activities of abused wives who defined themselves as religious with victims of abuse who viewed themselves as nonreligious. While religious women remained in their marriages longer than nonreligious women, they were not acquiescent. In fact they appeared to work harder to save their relationship, using more resources (e.g., counselors, religious leaders) in their attempts to resolve their situation. Horton et al. conclude: "Religious women can no longer be considered as barefoot and pregnant, weak and unable to change. They have shown a very different character and a positive approach to violence in their lives and for their families. They are not disadvantaged, nor should they be 'treated' for religiosity instead of abuse" (p. 245).

This study is not unusual. In our review of this empirical literature, Park and I (Pargament & Park, 1995) reached several conclusions: (1) religion is not inconsistent with an internal locus of control; (2) religion is not commensurate with passivity in the face of social oppression; and (3) in many cases, perhaps more often than not, measures of religiousness are linked to active rather than avoidant forms of coping. These conclusions should not come as a complete surprise. Among the religious faiths we can find rationales for active approaches to coping. For instance, deism acknowledges the existence of a God, but a God who does not interfere with the natural laws of the universe. From this perspective, God has given humanity the ability to reason and resolve problems itself. Galileo (1614/1988) voiced this view in the 17th century:

I do not feel obliged to believe that that same God who has endowed us with senses, reason, and intellect has intended to forgo their use and by some other means to give us a knowledge which we can attain by them. He would not require us to deny sense and reason in physical matters which are set before our eyes and minds by direct experience or necessary demonstrations. (p. 20)

The Protestant ethic has also encouraged vigorous activity and achievement in this world, not because God has set people free, but because worldly success is a sign of proof that one has been called by God.

Religious coping activities cover both ends of the spectrum of

human initiative and divine power—from autonomy, industry, and diligence to deference, passivity, and resignation. Of course, these are the extremes. There are other possibilities. When people describe the role of religion in coping they often point to a third style, one in which they are neither passive nor autonomous but instead interactive with God. In this kind of religious coping activity, God and the individual are collaborators in problem solving. Responsibility for coping is shared, with both partners playing an active role in this process. Heschel (1986) puts it this way: “God is a partner and partisan in man’s struggle for justice, peace, and holiness, and it is because of His being in need of man that He entered a covenant with him for all time, a mutual bond embracing God and man, a relationship to which God, not only man, is committed” (p. 172).

One of our interviewees from the Project on Religion and Coping (Pargament, Royster, et al., 1990) illustrated this collaborative approach. Joe was a 69-year-old man faced with a decision about whether to go through a risky heart operation or eventually become an invalid. When asked how religion was involved in his coping, Joe said he prayed to God for guidance, but not in a passive or deferring sense. In his prayers, God served as a supportive listening ear, a loving Being who helped him reflect on his situation and make the best possible choice. Together, Joe said, they decided that he would not make a very good invalid. So Joe went ahead with the surgery.

Self-Directing, Deferring, and Collaborative: Three Religious Approaches to Control in Coping

In the preceding discussion I have hinted at three distinctive approaches to responsibility and control in coping: (1) the self-directing approach, wherein people rely on themselves in coping rather than on God, (2) the deferring approach, in which the responsibility for coping is passively deferred to God; and (3) the collaborative approach, in which the individual and God are both active partners in coping. Several years ago, my students and I (Pargament et al., 1988) attempted to measure these three styles of religious coping. The short version of the three scales is presented in Table 7.2. We administered the scales to members of a Presbyterian and Missouri Synod Lutheran church and factor-analyzed the items. Three distinct factors emerged from the analyses, which paralleled exactly the three styles of religious coping. Furthermore, each of the three coping styles had different relationships with other measures of religiousness, and with measures of psychological and social competence.

TABLE 7.2. Three Styles of Religious Coping Scales

Self-directing

1. After I've gone through a rough time, I try to make sense of it without relying on God.
2. When I have difficulty, I decide what it means by myself without help from God.
3. When faced with trouble, I deal with my feelings without God's help.
4. When deciding on a solution, I make a choice independent of God's input.
5. When thinking about a difficulty, I try to come up with possible solutions without God's help.
6. I act to solve my problems without God's help.

Deferring

1. Rather than trying to come up with the right solution to a problem myself, I let God decide how to deal with it.
2. In carrying out solutions to my problems, I wait for God to take control and know somehow He'll work it out.
3. I do not think about different solutions to my problems because God provides them for me.
4. When a troublesome issue arises, I leave it up to God to decide what it means for me.
5. When a situation makes me anxious, I wait for God to take those feelings away.
6. I don't spend much time thinking about troubles I've had; God makes sense of them for me.

Collaborative

1. When it comes to deciding how to solve a problem, God and I work together as partners.
2. When considering a difficult situation, God and I work together to think of possible solutions.
3. Together, God and I put my plans into action.
4. When I feel nervous or anxious about a problem, I work together with God to find a way to relieve my worries.
5. After solving a problem, I work with God to make sense of it.
6. When I have a problem, I talk to God about it and together we decide what it means.

Note. The long form of the three styles of religious coping scales is available in Pargament et al. (1988). Copyright 1988 by The Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. Adapted by permission.

1. The self-directing style was negatively associated with most of the measures of religiousness. However, this was not a nonreligious approach. Even the more self-directing people in our study maintained an affiliation with their church. Moreover, self-directing scores were associated with higher scores on the measure of religious quest.

2. The deferring style was related to a greater sense of control by God, doctrinal orthodoxy, and extrinsic religiousness. The emphasis of this style was on dependence on external authority, rules, and beliefs as a way to meet particular needs.
3. In contrast, the collaborative style was associated with a greater frequency of prayer, higher religious salience, and intrinsic religiousness—indicators of a more committed, relational form of religion.

The three styles of coping were also connected to different levels of personal and social competence.

1. A more self-directing style was related to a greater sense of personal control in living and higher self-esteem. This finding is consistent with the general coping literature which emphasizes the value of proactivity and autonomy in problem solving.
2. A more deferring style was tied to a number of indicators of poorer competence: a lower sense of personal control, a greater sense of control by chance, lower self-esteem, less planful problem-solving skills, and greater intolerance for differences between people. These findings may not be too surprising; the deferring approach with its reliance on external authority seems to embody the passive, helpless kind of religiousness so heavily criticized by many psychologists.
3. Once again, in contrast to the deferring approach, the coping process involving an active give-and-take between the individual and God seemed to bode well for individual competence. A more collaborative style was associated with a greater sense of personal control, a lower sense of control by chance, and greater self-esteem.¹

Other researchers using these measures of religious coping styles with other samples have also found them to be associated with different kinds of religious beliefs and practices, different levels of physical and mental health, and different approaches to health and pastoral care (Bransfield, Ivy, Rutledge, & Wallston, 1991; Casebolt, 1990; Hathaway & Pargament, 1990; Kaiser, 1991; McIntosh & Spilka, 1990; Pargament, Ensing, et al., 1990; Schaefer & Gorsuch, 1991; Sears & Greene, 1994; Winger & Hunsberger, 1988).²

These three religious coping styles may not be the only religious approaches to responsibility and control. Pleas and petitions to God for divine intervention represent another method deserving further study. Petitions for divine intervention are not uncommon. Forty-two percent

of people in one national survey acknowledged that they prayed to God for material things (Poloma & Gallup, 1991). One pharmaceutical company recently established a prayer network that physicians can access to request intercessory prayers on behalf of the health of their patients (Wall, 1994). Requests for divine intervention have both active and passive elements. Ultimate control and responsibility for the outcome of the situation are seen as resting in God's hands. However, the individual who pleads for divine intercession is actively, albeit indirectly, attempting to shape the outcome of the situation. In self-directing coping, control is sought *by the self*. In deferring coping, control is sought *by God*. In collaborative coping, control is sought *with God*. And in petitionary coping, control is sought *through God*. In Chapter 10 we will review some evidence suggesting that petitionary coping has mixed implications for adjustment.

The point here is not that we have identified a few good ways of religious coping and a few bad ones. (Later I will consider how these styles of coping relate to other measures of personal and social well-being and how the helpfulness of these approaches may vary from situation to situation). Neither am I suggesting that these approaches to control are the only kinds of religious coping methods. What have been identified here are some of the distinctive ways people integrate their conceptions of divine power with human initiative. To define religious coping as passive is not incorrect. It is incomplete. Submission and deference to God are only two of the many faces of religion.

To the distant observer the involvement of religion in coping may appear to be uniform. But we have taken a closer look at religion and seen it to be many-sided, a force that can come to life in a variety of ways in every part of the coping process: in the ends we strive toward, in the construction of life events, and in the concrete steps we take in the midst of stress. I hope this discussion has left the reader with a healthy skepticism for stereotypes and simple descriptions of religious life.

Measuring the Many Faces of Religious Coping

A few researchers have developed measures of the degree to which people turn to religion for help in coping with negative events (e.g., Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Koenig, George, & Siegler, 1988). These scales are helpful in describing *how much* religion is involved in coping, but they do not specify *how* religion is involved. For this latter purpose, a more differentiated approach is needed.

In the Project on Religion and Coping, my colleagues and I (Pargament, Ensing, et al., 1990) assessed some of the many faces of religious

coping in more detail. Unlike the measures of the three styles of religious coping that were developed around the theoretical construct of control, the approach we took to developing the religious coping activities scales was not explicitly theoretical. Questions were generated through interviews with church and synagogue members, personal accounts of religious coping, and a review of the literature. We tried to assess a wide array of religious coping methods, methods that embody thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and relationships. These questions were then given to a sample of church members who were asked to respond in terms of how they had coped with the most serious negative event they had experienced in the past year. Our questions focused on three dimensions: the purposes or ends of significance the members hoped to achieve through religious coping, the members' appraisals of the event, and their coping methods. To reduce the many questions about coping activities and purposes to a more manageable set of scales, we conducted factor

TABLE 7.3. The Religious Coping Items and Scales

<i>Purposes of Religion in Coping^a</i>	
Spiritual	Personal closeness with God
	A sense of meaning and purpose in life
	Feeling of hope about the future
Self-Development	Help in feeling good about myself
	Feeling more in control of my life
	Help in improving myself as a person
Resolve	Help in solving my problems
	A sense of peace and comfort
Sharing	Help in expressing my feelings
	A sense of closeness and belonging with other people
Restraint	Help in keeping my emotions or actions under control
<i>Religious Appraisals of the Event^b</i>	
	The event was God's will
	The event was a punishment from God
	My spiritual well-being was threatened
<i>Religious Coping Activities^c</i>	
Spiritually Based	God showed me how to deal with the situation
	Looked for the lesson from God in the event
	Took control over what I could, and gave the rest up to God
	Sought God's love and care
	Realized that God was trying to strengthen me

(continued)

- Realized that I didn't have to suffer since Jesus suffered for me
- In dealing with the problem I was guided by God
- Trusted that God would not let anything terrible happen to me
- Used Christ as an example of how I should live
- My faith showed me different ways to handle the problem
- Accepted that the situation was not in my hands but in the hands of God
- Used my faith to help me decide how to cope with the situation
- Good Deeds
 - Tried to be less sinful
 - Offered help to other church members
 - Confessed my sins
 - Tried to lead a more loving life
 - Attended religious services or participated in religious rituals
 - Participated in church groups (support groups, prayer groups, Bible-study groups)
- Discontent
 - Expressed feelings of anger or distance from God
 - Expressed feelings of anger or distance from the members of the church
 - Questioned my religious beliefs and faith
- Religious Support
 - Sought support from clergy
 - Sought support from other members of the church
- Plead
 - Pleaded with God to make things turn out okay
 - Asked for a miracle
 - Bargained with God to make things better
 - Asked God why it happened
 - Begged for God's help
- Religious Avoidance
 - Focused on the world-to-come rather than the problems of this world
 - Let God solve my problems for me
 - Prayed or read the Bible to keep my mind off of my problems
 - Let God worry about the problem for me

^aInstructions: "In dealing with this event, what were you seeking or aiming for through your relationship with God, your church, and your religious beliefs and practices?"

^bInstructions: "At the time the event occurred, to what degree did you have the following reaction to the event?"

^cInstructions: "To what extent was each of the following involved in coping with the event?" Some items on the Religious Coping Activities scales were revised and added in Pargament et al. (1994)

analyses (Pargament, Ensing, et al., 1990). The Christian form of these scales and items are presented in Table 7.3, and briefly described here.

1. The religious purpose items describe the ends the church member was seeking through religion in coping with their particular event. The Spiritual factor brings the desire for closeness with God together with the search for meaning and hope. Self-Development is made up of the

search for self-esteem, control, and self-actualization. The Resolve factor focuses on religion as an aid to the resolution of problems and emotional comfort. Sharing incorporates the search for intimacy and emotional expression with others through religion. Finally, Restraint reflects the members' desire for religious help in curbing emotions and behaviors.

2. The appraisal items include more benign assessments of the situation from a religious perspective (God's will) as well as more negative ones (God's punishment; spiritual threat).

3. The religious coping activities items reflect different uses of religion in coping. The Spiritually Based factor emphasizes the individual's relationship with God in coping. Through this relationship, problems are reframed positively, the limits of personal control are accepted, and guidance and reassurance are sought. The Good Deeds factor reflects a focus on action; in particular, on living a better, more religiously integrated life. In Discontent, we hear anger, distance, and questions about God and the church. Religious Support involves the attempt to obtain assistance from the clergy or fellow church members. Plead is made up of bargains with God and petitions for a miracle as well as questions about why the event happened. And the Religious Avoidance items involve activities that divert attention from the negative event through prayer, Bible reading, or beliefs in the afterlife.

The religious coping activities scales are not the last word in the conceptualization and measurement of religious coping. The scales are not explicitly theoretical and they do not measure some important coping approaches (e.g., religious forgiveness, conversion). In the next chapter I will take a closer look at religious coping methods from a more theoretical, purposive point of view. My colleagues and I are also in the process of developing a more comprehensive, functionally oriented set of religious coping scales as well as a brief measure of positive and negative patterns of religious coping (see Chapter 10; Pargament, Smith, & Koenig, 1996). Other measures of religious coping are also needed for groups outside of mainline Christian traditions. What these scales do capture are some of the many forms of religious coping among Christians (see Zerowin, 1996, for a Jewish form). As we will see, they have proven to be useful in understanding the factors that shape religious coping, in predicting how people adjust to crises, and in suggesting more helpful and more harmful methods of religious coping. Let us turn our attention to one of these issues now.

If it is true that religion has many faces in coping, then what determines its expression? Why, for instance, does one seriously ill person feel that God is punishing her while another faced with the same illness views her condition as an opportunity to grow spiritually? Why does a death trigger intense involvement in a synagogue for one man and

solitary prayer for another? Why does one unemployed man plead with God for a miracle and another ask God for the strength to get through hard times?

SHAPING THE EXPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS COPING

In the last chapter, I noted how individual, social, and contextual forces converge to affect whether people involve religion in their coping. However, these forces do more than influence *whether* people cope religiously. By making some religious options more available and more compelling than others, they shape *how* people choose to express religion in coping.

Situational Forces and the Shape of Religious Coping

Life events have pushes and pulls of their own. As noted in the last chapter, situations that highlight the frailty of the human condition and the power of forces far greater than ourselves often push for a religious response. But there are many kinds of boundary situations and, as we have seen, many kinds of religious coping; the particular expression of religion depends in part on the particular losses, threats, and challenges each situation poses to significance.

For example, wherever we find a major life transition, we are likely to see religious rituals and beliefs at play tailored to the distinctive tensions these situations raise. Circumcisions, baptisms, and naming ceremonies are some of the religious rituals that mark a birth; each facilitates the integration of the new member into community life. Communion, confirmations, B'nai Mitzvot, and initiation rites are some of the ceremonies that mark a child's coming of age; each calls for a change in the roles and responsibilities of the soon-to-be adult. Funerals, mourning practices, and commemoration ceremonies are some of the rituals that mark a death; each offers an outlet for the expression of loss, a forum for support to those in grief, and a mechanism for reuniting a disrupted community.

Other life crises also press for different religious responses, as religious leaders and clergy are well aware. Compare the religious advice offered by Christian chaplains to people dealing with three contrasting situations—imprisonment, divorce, and physical incapacitation. In the solace to the prisoner we hear an attempt to assuage guilt:

You may feel guilty about the kind of life you have led, but that should not prevent you from experiencing joy. When the Israelites returned

to Jerusalem after being in captivity for years, they felt guilty because they knew they had not been obeying the laws of Moses. But Nehemiah told them, "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (Singer, 1983, p. 20)

In a prayer offered to the divorced, the spiritual response is tailored more closely to the problems of isolation and loneliness:

There is no one to reach out to me in my lonely bed. How I long to have someone to touch and hold, to laugh and talk with, to shout at and to hug. I reach for you and you are not there. Did you give me this seering loneliness so that it would be easier for me to give you everything? All of me? This I know, I need your love. Come, Jesus, come. Amen. (Payne, 1982, p. 13)

And the words to the physically incapacitated are particularly suited to questions of the fairness and meaning of suffering:

God does not make arbitrary choices about who shall suffer and who shall not, who shall live and who shall die. Nor does God desire to punish or humble us. . . . Knowing that difficulties are part of life and that God does not purposely send them our way enables us to move from the "Why me?" questions to the "How" questions—"How can I survive this trying time? How can I cope with my situation? How can I grow through what I am experiencing?" (Biegert, 1985, pp. 5-6)

As these vignettes show, the religious world can be "situationally sensitive" (cf. Oden, 1983), molding its response to the problem at hand.

Whether individuals show a similar sensitivity to the nature of the situation in their own choices of religious coping is another question. Religion is often thought of as a stable personality characteristic, an orientation to life applied consistently and unvaryingly across time and place. In the Project on Religion and Coping, we tested whether different life events are linked to different religious and nonreligious coping strategies (Pargament, Olsen, et al., 1992a). The religious coping methods were described earlier. The nonreligious coping questions focused on (1) the degree the event was appraised as a threat, challenge/opportunity, or harm/loss, and (2) the degree the person coped with the event by focusing on the positive, problem solving, avoidance of the problem, or interpersonal support (McCrae, 1984; Moos, Cronkite, Billings, & Finney, 1984; Stone & Neale, 1984).

We subdivided our sample into groups who had experienced one of four negative events over the past year: (1) the death of a family member or close friend; (2) a work-related problem such as unemployment, or

being fired or laid off; (3) an interpersonal conflict such as a divorce or separation; or (4) a health-related problem. We then compared the way the four groups coped. If religion were situationally insensitive, then we would expect to see few differences in the ways the groups coped with their respective problems. Religion would express itself similarly regardless of the negative event. If religion were situationally sensitive, then we would expect to find each group coping differently with their troubles. What did we find?

Our results lent some support to the situationally sensitive view (Pargament, Olsen, et al., 1992a). The four groups coped differently across the board: They appraised their situations differently, made use of different religious and nonreligious coping activities, and looked to religion for different purposes. Most distinctive of all was the religious response to death. More than those in other situations, people who had lost a loved one appraised their situation as the will of God. They took more religiously avoidant steps to help them shift their focus from their losses, and they looked more to their religion for sharing and closeness with others. Along with people facing health-related problems, they engaged more in spiritually based coping and received more support from their clergy and fellow congregation members. Interestingly, the group grappling with death was less likely than other groups to make use of nonreligious coping activities, such as problem solving or focusing on the positive. Clearly, death and religion were closely wrapped together. It is important to emphasize, however, that individuals who had suffered a death did not simply lay a "religious blanket" over their loss. Their approach to religious coping was selective. For example, they were as likely as anyone else to perform good deeds, plead with God, or voice their religious discontent in coping. In short, the religious response to death was not indiscriminate; it was molded to the needs among these people for emotional, social, and spiritual support.

The Project on Religion and Coping afforded us another opportunity to study the question of situational sensitivity. Because we followed up with these members 1 year later, readministering the same scales, we were able to measure how consistently the same person coped religiously over time and situation. Church members were placed into one of two groups: those facing similar situations and those facing different situations over the 1-year period. As expected, there was a strong degree of similarity in religious coping for people dealing with the same kind of situation 1 year later. Similar situations led to similar coping. But what about people confronting different situations? Would they apply the same religious solution to their new problems or a different one? Our results revealed a much smaller correlation in religious coping among people in this group. As the situation changed, people became less likely

to use religion in the way they had before. In other words, different problems seemed to push for different religious solutions. Hathaway (1992) also reported day-to-day variations in several types of religious coping among people dealing with hassles over a 90-day period. These hassles included preparing meals, too many interruptions, not enough sleep, and difficulties at work.

To say that situations contribute to the shape of our lives seems obvious. But to say that situations also shape the nature of religion in our lives is less apparent. Because religion is so often seen as a stable part of personality, the power of the situation in religious experience and the capacity of a faith to adapt itself to a variety of circumstances may be underestimated. However, the evidence reviewed here, limited as it is, suggests that situations do affect the way religion expresses itself in coping. Of course, they are not the only determining force. As we have stressed, people do not cope alone nor do they come to coping empty-handed.

Cultural Forces and the Shape of Religious Coping

Culture makes some ways of thinking about and dealing with critical problems more accessible and more compelling to its members than others. This point holds true for religion. Culture selectively encourages some religious expressions in coping and selectively discourages others.

Stephenson (1983–1984) describes the case of a 48-year-old man suffering from lymphosarcoma who died 2 weeks after his initial collapse. Family members were particularly despondent. After the funeral, one brother of the deceased angrily said to another: “He died too quick, too quick. . . . he was so alive. Well I’ve seen worse cases . . . men who went out in the morning to work and who never came back! But, he just died too quick” (p. 131). This death caused a great deal of consternation and conflict in the community.

To members of Western culture, these reactions may seem a bit peculiar. A death of this kind would certainly lead to shock and sadness, but the grief might be cushioned by the recognition that the person went quickly and did not have to suffer. However, the death Stephenson described occurred within a Hutterian colony. In this culture, the ideal death is protracted. A prolonged death offers Hutterites the time to make amends for their sins, to forgive and be forgiven, and to prepare for eternal life. As one Hutterite put it: “We prefer slow deaths, not sudden deaths. We want to have plenty of time to consider eternity and to confess and make everything right. We don’t like to see a grownup go suddenly” (Hostetler, 1974, cited in Stephenson, 1983–1984, p. 128). Here we have an illustration of culture shaping the religious interpreta-

tion of a situation. The quick and painless death is, to the Hutterite, a spiritual blow.

Cultures shape religious coping methods as well as religious appraisals. For several years ethnographer Unni Wikan (1988) lived and worked in two different cultures, Egypt and Bali, that share the religion of Islam. In spite of their common religion, Wikan found, the members of the two cultures cope very differently with death. In Egypt the death of a child precipitates intensive reactions of grief and suffering: "They will cry as if pouring their hearts out. Females will scream, yell, beat their breasts, collapse in each others' arms and be quite beyond themselves for days, even weeks on end" (p. 452).

Balinese respond quite differently to the death of a child: "They will strive to act with calm and composure, especially beyond the circle of closest family and closest friends. But even among intimates, their reactions will be moderate and laughter, joking and cheerfulness mingle with mutely expressed sadness" (p. 452).

Why such different responses to death from people of the same faith? Religion, Wikan maintains, is filtered through culture; Egyptians and Balinese alike draw on the elements of Islam most consistent with their ethos. In the world of the Egyptian, emotional expression is viewed as essential to health. "Unhappiness must find a way out of the body or it weighs upon the soul" (p. 458). Cultural norms encourage the open display of all feelings—sadness, anger, and conflict. And Islam, with its vision of a compassionate and merciful God, abets the emotional expression of the Egyptian.

Among the Balinese emotional expression has a different meaning. It represents a threat to oneself, others, and the soul of the dead. Bad feelings are said to interfere with good judgment. Not only that, they are contagious, putting others in the community at risk. As important is the danger emotional upset poses to the soul of the dead. According to Balinese Muslims, the fate of the soul is dependent on the actions of the living. One man said: "If we cry and are unhappy, the soul will be unhappy too, not free to go to the God. We must contain our sadness that the soul will be liberated to go to heaven" (p. 458). Like the Egyptians, the Balinese are supported in their approach to bereavement by aspects of Islam. But in the latter case the key Islamic tenet is the belief that death is foreordained by God and one must submit to God's will. "The Balinese often remind themselves that to give oneself over to grief is like opposing God's will" (p. 458).

Wikan concludes that culture plays the critical role in shaping the response of Balinese and Egyptians to loss. The religion of Islam is not unimportant here. But it is an Islam which takes different shapes across different cultures: ". . . despite its all-embracing and rigorous character

[Islam] is nevertheless always subjected to distinct and particularistic, locally produced interpretations, that lend a particular cast and character to its precepts, laws, and pervasive doctrines" (p. 451). Although Wikan focuses on Islam, her conclusions may apply equally well to other faiths.

Even in the so-called "melting pot" of the United States, the individuals' culture of origin continues to affect the response to questions of ultimate importance in living. McReady and Greeley (1976) asked a large sample of Americans how they would react to each of four hypothetical situations: one's own terminal illness, having a son drafted into combat, the slow and painful death of a parent, and the birth of a mentally retarded child. They categorized the responses into five groups: (1) Religious optimist ("God will take care of everything, so there is no need to worry"), (2) Hopeful ("There is no denying the evil of what is happening, but the last word has not been said yet"), (3) Secular optimist ("Everything will turn out for the best somehow"), (4) Pessimist ("There is nothing that can be done; what will be will be"), and (5) Diffuse ("Unsure, don't know") (p. 19).

Among their many comparisons, McCreedy and Greeley contrasted the ways people of different ethnic heritage responded to the painful scenarios. Even among members of the same religious group, differences in culture of origin were associated with varied approaches to coping. For instance, Catholics of Polish and Spanish background were more likely to be religious optimists or hopeful and less likely to be pessimists than Catholics of Irish, German, or Italian ancestry. Protestants of Scandinavian origin were more likely to respond with religious optimism and less likely to indicate secular optimism than British or German Protestants. The authors were not able to sort out the potential influence of other variables, such as socioeconomic status, on their findings. Nevertheless, their findings suggest that Americans continue to carry a legacy from the cultures of their ancestors that influences their responses, religious and nonreligious, to the most basic problems in living in the United States.

Individual Forces and the Shape of Religious Coping: The Orienting System

Important as the situation and culture are, neither can account for the diversity of religious coping. Cook and Wimberly (1983) underscore this point in their poignant study of religious coping among parents who had suffered the death of a child. Their sample of parents had many things in common: Most were white, married, employed, Protestant, had at least a high school education, and lived in the same geographical area. Most importantly, all had lost a child as a result of either cancer or

blood disorders. However, in spite of similar situations and social backgrounds, their religious responses were far from identical. Many parents expressed the belief that they would one day be reunited with their child in heaven. The father of a 14-year-old boy who died of leukemia said: "I figure God gave me Gary for 14 years and it was super, he was a neat kid to have around, it was a wonderful experience for me. And if I play my cards right I'll see him again" (p. 229). Other parents viewed the death as a punishment for their own sins. One father who drank too much and had an extramarital affair during the illness of his son said: "[God] took him from me because of the rotten life that I lived. I think it was an awakening thing, that's the reason why [God] done it" (p. 228). Still another group of parents felt that the death of their child served a noble and divine purpose. As one parent said: "I believe that he was sent here for some reason and he had served his purpose and was taken back. He had faith in God, such faith . . . he touched so many lives" (p. 229).

If these parents were distinguished by neither culture nor circumstance, what accounts for their diverse responses? Cook and Wimberly do not focus on this issue, but one good hypothesis is that the parents were distinguished by the orientation they brought to the situation. Each came with a particular way of thinking about, acting, feeling, and relating to his or her world; each brought different resources and burdens to coping. Guided by their respective orienting systems, religious as well as nonreligious, these parents followed different paths in their struggle with loss. Those who generally look to religion as a source of comfort in living may have found the belief that they would join their child in the afterlife particularly compelling. Those who generally integrate their faith throughout their lives may have sought out ways to imbue their loss with religious purpose. Those who look to God for justice may have found it less frightening to view the death as a divine punishment than to consider the possibility that there is no God or that God is capricious.

As part of the orienting system, religion influences how situations are viewed and understood. In this vein, Kushner (1989) writes: "Religion is not primarily a set of beliefs, a collection of prayers, or a series of rituals. Religion is first and foremost a way of seeing. It can't change the facts about the world we live in, but it can change the way we see those facts, and that in itself can often make a difference" (p. 27). To use more psychological language, religion is, in part, a cognitive schema (McIntosh, 1995), a mental representation of the world that helps us filter and make sense of the massive amounts of stimulation we encounter.

But there are many ways of viewing the world religiously. Present the same information to people with different orientations and they will

process it quite differently. Clergy are well aware of this point. Every week they present a sermon to their members and receive, in return, a bewildering array of reactions—from the yawn, polite nod, and “nice sermon, Reverend” to the frown, puzzled look, and desire to talk more after the service. Although the members belong to the same congregation and listen to the same sermon, they look at the world through different religious glasses; thus, the identical sermon takes on a very different appearance to the members (see Pargament & DeRosa, 1985, for an example).

The orienting system influences not only the way situations are viewed and understood, but the way they are handled. Depending on the nature of the orienting system, some religious options for coping become more accessible and more compelling than others. For example, Ebaugh, Richman, and Chafetz (1984) interviewed members of Catholic Charismatic, Christian Science, and Bahai faiths about their ways of coping. Although Ebaugh et al. had expected the groups to report different types and frequencies of life crises, these variations were relatively small and explained by demographic differences between the groups. What set the groups apart were their ways of coping. These differences could not be explained by demographic factors. Consistent with their theology, Christian Scientists engaged first and foremost in positive thinking. The other groups rarely used positive thinking to cope with their crises. Bahais and Catholic Charismatics were more likely to look for support than Christian Scientists. However, the two former groups seemed to want a different kind of support. The Charismatics sought out fellow members for emotional solace, while the Bahais looked to others for help in interpreting their sacred works. In contrast to the other two groups, Catholic Charismatics also engaged in more passive deferring religious responses, such as waiting for the Lord or putting the problem in God’s hands. Ebaugh et al. tie these differences in religious coping to the distinctive theologies of the religious groups.

In the Project on Religion and Coping, my colleagues and I (Pargament, Olsen, et al., 1992b) took a closer look at the nature of the religious orienting system and its relationship to the concrete ways people cope with crises. Recall that a religious orientation was defined as a *general* disposition to use particular means in the search for particular ends. As a general disposition, a religious orientation is not involved with the details of any one situation. It comes to life only after it has been translated into a more concrete language that speaks to the problem at hand. We suspected that the three most commonly studied religious orientations—intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest—would translate into very different approaches to coping with critical life events. To test this hypothesis, scores on the measures of these three orientations were

correlated with the coping responses of congregation members to the most serious life event they had experienced in the past year. Our hypothesis was confirmed. Each of the orientations was associated with a distinctive approach to coping, both religiously and nonreligiously.

1. The *intrinsic orientation* was closely bound to spiritual forms of coping. Those who were more intrinsic looked to their religion more for spiritual purposes and less for self-development in coping. They also were more likely to make use of spiritually based coping activities, such as seeking God's guidance in problem solving. Even though the more intrinsically oriented read the Bible more and thought about the hereafter more to take their minds off their problems, the orientation was not altogether avoidant or passive. In fact, intrinsicness was related to *lower* scores on the measure of nonreligious avoidance in coping and *higher* scores on the measure of problem solving. The appraisals associated with intrinsicness were also interesting: the more intrinsic congregation members viewed their events as a spiritual threat as well as an opportunity to grow. But they did not appraise their crises as any less harmful than other members. Apparently, intrinsic religiousness highlights only the spiritual risk of critical events, but the threat is counterbalanced by appraisals of promise and opportunity for growth in the situations.

2. People with a more *extrinsic orientation* looked to religion largely for their own personal development. There was a more defensive, even desperate tenor to coping here. In appraising the situations, extrinsicness was related to lower levels of self-blame, greater perceptions of personal threat to one's health, more of a sense that the situation cannot be personally handled, and less of a feeling that the event offers an opportunity for growth. Interestingly, the more extrinsically oriented more often reported that they could change the situation, but apparently not through their own actions. Extrinsicness was related to nonreligious avoidance and a focus on the positive. In the religious realm it was tied to pleading with God and performing good deeds; both of these religious coping efforts may reflect their efforts to sway God to intervene on their own behalf.

3. The quest orientation expressed itself in yet another way in coping. Like intrinsic religiousness, quest was associated with the search for spirituality through religion in coping. However, a finer analysis of the items on the spirituality scale indicated that quest was related only to the item dealing with the search for meaning. Consistent with Batson et al.'s (1993) description of this construct, the quest orientation was marked by signs of active struggle. Quest, like intrinsic religiousness, was tied to appraisals of the event as both a spiritual threat and an opportunity to grow. The religious coping methods related to quest were

action oriented, focusing on efforts at personal improvement through good deeds and expressions of discontent to God and the church.

It seems clear that the individual's orienting system has important implications for the way religion is expressed in specific situations. But, as yet, only a few facets of the orienting system have been studied. In all likelihood, religious coping is shaped by other orienting variables as well, such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, development over the lifespan, personality, mental health, and still other religious orientations.

CONCLUSIONS

"When my son was killed in 1975, that was the first time my faith was really tested. Before that everything was just theory" (Cobble, 1985, p. 140). It is one thing to think about religion apart from immediate problems and concerns. It is another to apply it to real tragedies and losses. Much of the psychology of religion has focused on the former approach—the religion of general beliefs, practices, and orientations that may have little to do with the down-to-earth predicaments of living. The psychology of religion and coping, however, shifts our attention from heaven to earth, to the specifics of religious expression in troubled times.

In this chapter we have seen that religion is not "one thing" in coping. It takes on different forms at different times and in different places. It appears in the ends sought, the construction of events, and the coping methods themselves. Religion is a force that helps shape the coping process and is, itself, shaped in turn. Stereotypical views of religion as a form of tension reduction, denial, or passive-avoidant coping do not do justice to the varied manifestations of religion in critical times.

But in moving away from simple description and stereotypes, in shifting from the macroanalytic to the microanalytic, from the distal to the proximal, the task of studying religion has become more complex. Some readers may wonder whether all of this is really necessary. After all, what difference does it make how religion expresses itself in the concrete? Isn't it enough to know about the individual's general religious approach to life? Or do we even need to know about the religious dimension of coping? Isn't it enough to know about how the person copes more generally? These questions cut to the very heart of the psychology of religion and coping. They challenge the assumption that how religion comes to life in critical situations is indeed important. In Chapter 10, I will present evidence that these concrete manifestations of religion are significant predictors of how particular situations will unfold. In fact, we will see that measures of religious coping predict the

outcomes of negative events more strongly than standard measures of general religious orientation (e.g., frequency of prayer, frequency of church attendance, intrinsic religiousness). We will also see that the measures of religious coping add something beyond what we already know about crises from the secular study of coping. When religion is entered into the coping equation, it increases our ability to predict outcomes beyond the effects of secular coping methods. The main conclusion is this: Any understanding of religion and any understanding of coping remains incomplete when we overlook the transition from heaven to earth and the roles of religion “in the dust of our trials.”

In this chapter I have described many of the faces and expressions of religion in coping and the forces that shape them. To stop here, however, would leave the mistaken impression that religious coping is totally determined by the larger context, the event, or what the person brings to the event. While these forces encourage some ways of coping and discourage others, they do not dictate the response to crisis. There is a pull as well as a push to coping. And the pull comes from the character of significance. People generally choose ways to cope from their available options in an effort to maximize significance. But when viable options are not available, they can create new ones or change the nature of significance. In the next two chapters I consider the religious search for significance in coping from this more purposive, volitional point of view. I will focus on the involvement of religion in the two central mechanisms of coping—conservation and transformation.