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Some contributions of a psychological approach to the study of the sacred

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the contributions psychology is making to the study of the sacred and its role in human functioning. The focus here is not on the ontological reality of the sacred, but rather perceptions of the sacred. We suggest that psychological theory and research on this topic offers: a clarification of the meaning of the sacred; new knowledge about sanctification – the process through which people come to perceive the sacred in daily life; a response to criticisms about the scientific study of the sacred; a sharper perspective on the meanings of religion and spirituality; a method for measuring sanctification; knowledge about the ways perceptions of the sacred predict important aspects of human behavior, and; an understanding of the sacred as a product of psychological, social, institutional, cultural, and situational forces. We conclude that the sacred represents a vital phenomenon of interest for religious and spiritual study.

This chapter examines some of the contributions psychology is making to the study of the sacred and its role in human functioning. Our chapter rests on two Jamesian assumptions. Consistent with James (1912/2003) perspective on radical empiricism, we assume that we can examine understandings and perceptions of the sacred, including their character, antecedents, and consequences, without metaphysical speculation about their ultimate nature. And consistent with James (1907/1975) views on pragmatism, we assume that the value of studies of perceptions of the sacred rests on their fruitfulness; that is, the degree to which psychological studies in this area yield findings of theoretical and practical value, and raise important questions that open up promising new avenues for further investigation.

We believe the sacred represents a vital phenomenon of interest for religious and spiritual study. We begin the chapter by providing a definition of the sacred. With this definition in hand, we address some of the criticisms that have been leveled against studies of the sacred. Next, we attempt to show that a psychological approach to perceptions of the sacred can help sharpen definitions of religion and spirituality, offer a method for measuring perceptions of the sacred, contribute to knowledge about the ways perceptions of the sacred predict important aspects of human behavior, and advance an understanding of the sacred as a product of psychological, social, institutional, cultural, and situational forces.

Defining the sacred

The term 'sacred' or related concepts can be found within different languages in the world. The sacred is not conceived identically across all cultures, but conceptions show enough similarities that they can arguably be viewed, as we do in this chapter, as displaying at least a family resemblance (Eliade 1957). Historically, many cultural understandings of the sacred have been informed by the mystical or other transcendent experiences of the early founders and leaders of the tradition, which in turn may be influenced, but not determined, by requirements of the human perceptual apparatus (Blum 2014).

Generally, at least in the west, it is possible to distinguish between two uses of the term 'sacred': as a noun and as an adjective. The noun 'sacred' refers to things that are 'set apart' from the ordinary, things felt to be numinous or saturated with divine presence. Beneveniste (1973) finds several words in Indo-European languages for this usage of sacred: *heil, sanctus, spenta, hieros* (cited in Paden 1991, 22). The adjective 'sacred' is rooted in the French verb *sacre* which means consecrate to God and has to do with a process of conferring sacred status on to objects through hallowing, blessing, sanctifying, or making them holy, as in the case of the sanctification of the bread and wine in the Eucharistic sacrament of the Catholic mass (Oxford 2015).

Our focus here is not on the ontological reality of the sacred, but rather perceptions of the sacred. But before we move further, it is important to say a few words about the meaning of 'perception.' Because people are constantly being bombarded by literally millions of stimuli, psychological mechanisms are needed to filter, manage, and create some regularity of incoming sensations. Perception involves a process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting sensations (Glasersfeld 1995). Rather than passive, it is an active constructive task in which people make sense of incoming sensations. The object becomes 'represented' in the mind. Perception is itself shaped by experience, beliefs, affect, and a larger social context.

Pargament and Mahoney (2005) have defined the sacred in terms of a core and a ring. At the core of the sacred lie concepts of God, the divine, higher powers, and transcendent reality. These concepts can take myriad forms ranging from monotheistic views of a personal God to polytheism to non-theistic perspectives on a transcendent reality, such as those articulated within Buddhism. From this point of view, people from diverse religious traditions – eastern and western—as well as those unaffiliated with any tradition can have a perspective on the sacred core. Though the core may be viewed differently (e.g., Gries, Su, and Schak 2012), concepts of what is most central to the sacred arguably possess much in common across different traditions, even if no single element, such as theism, is present in every tradition. Even within a tradition, different theologians, philosophers, clergy, or lay adherents may possess varying concepts of what is most prototypically sacred (the sacred core), and may possess correspondingly varying notions of where the boundary should be recognized between the sacred core and what has been sanctified by association with it. Yet despite these variations, there may remain much overlap in their views, reflecting numerous recurring typicality features. We will elaborate on the concepts of prototypes and typicality features shortly. We now turn to the meaning of sanctification.

Vital as concepts of the sacred core are, we do not define the sacred solely by beliefs in God, higher powers, or transcendent reality. The sacred also encompasses a wider ring consisting of aspects of life (i.e., 'objects') that take on deeper meaning and value
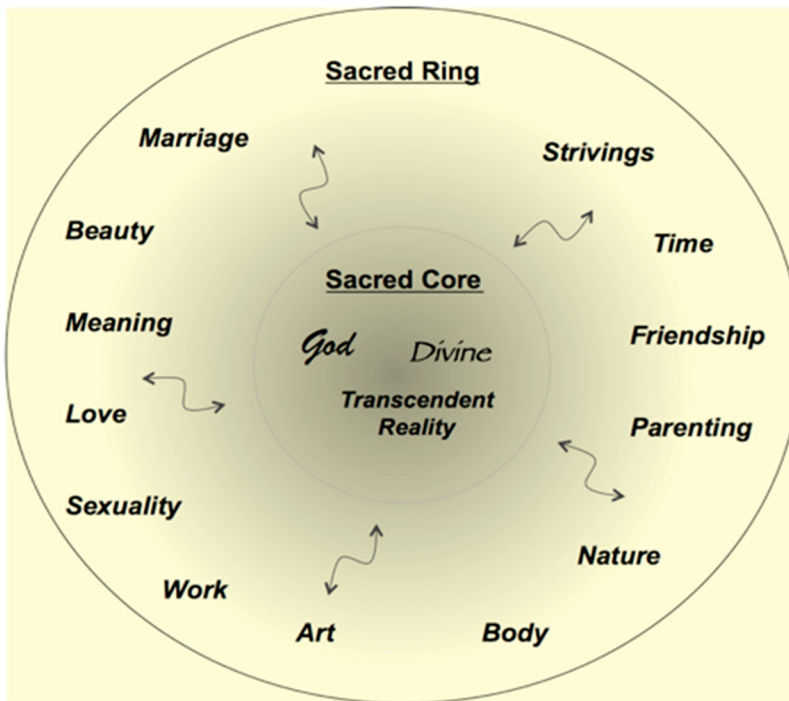
Figure 1. Sacred core and ring.

through the process of sanctification (see Figure 1). Sanctification refers to 'a process through which aspects of life are perceived as having divine character and significance' (183).[1] The phrase 'divine character and significance' is, by design, an inclusive one that encompasses not only theistic notions of the divine as a personal god(s), but also non-theistic views of the divine as a transcendent reality, and qualities that are often associated with theistic and non-theistic concepts of the divine.[2] Sanctification can occur both among groups and individuals, who may early in life be socialized into institutionally and culturally established views not only of the sacred core, but also regarding what else in life is sacred (e.g., particular individuals, objects, or places of pilgrimage). Further, as explained later at length, claims that an object became sanctified through a psychological process of sanctification do not either support or inherently contradict a religious group's (emic) belief that its perceptions of sanctity correspond to actual realities beyond their own minds. Pargament and Mahoney go on to present a useful heuristic distinction between two interrelated types of sanctification, theistic, and nontheistic. Because of its centrality to recent advances in the field, we elaborate on sanctification below.

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[1]Although distinctions have been proposed between 'sanctification' and 'sacralization' (e.g., Emmons and Crumpler 1999), we have chosen to use the term 'sanctification' because it has become fairly standard in this emerging body of psychological research.

[2]This broad use of 'divine' is consistent with other definitions of the term that are not limited to theistic concepts. For example, in the Oxford English Dictionary (2015) two uses of divine are 'connected or dealing with divinity or sacred things' and 'godlike, heavenly, celestial.' The term has a broad meaning within other religions as well. In Hinduism, the concept of the divine is associated with images of light. The Sanskrit word 'deva' is rooted in 'div' meaning 'to shine' which is, in turn, related to the Greek dios or 'divine' (Harper 2015).

Theistic sanctification: perceiving manifestations of deities in life

Through the theistic sanctification process, people perceive aspects of life as manifestations of deities. This is not a far-fetched idea. According to many religious traditions, gods are very much concerned about earthly matters and immanent in this world. For example, within some forms of Christianity, the sacraments provide a meeting point between the divine and the human: through baptism an infant takes on the identity of 'a child of God' and through the marital ritual the relationship between husband and wife becomes a sacred covenant that brings God into the marital union. These sacraments can take less traditional forms as well, as can be heard in the way one American who had been disabled for nine years described his experience:

> It is limiting to believe that sacraments occur only in churches … I know that when I do not go to Mass, I am still receiving communion, because I desire it; and because God is in me, as He is in the light, the earth, the leaf … I am receiving sacraments with each breath … with each movement of my body as I exercise my lower abdomen to ease the pain in my back … as I perform crunches and leg lifts. (Dubus 2001, 157)

As the above example suggests, theistic sanctification can extend the core of the sacred to many parts of life. People can (and as we will see shortly, often do) perceive God as manifest within nature, work, the body, the self, virtues, relationships, time and space, and so on (Pargament 2007). For example, one young American shows how people can interpret nearly any human activity as being an incarnation of God's actions and influence in daily life:

> God has a deep raspy voice – God is a jazz singer. She is plush, warm, and rosy – God is a grandmother. He has the patient rock of an old man in a porch rocker. He hums and laughs, he marvels at the sky. God coos at babies – she is a new mother. He is the steady, gentle hand of a nurse, has the cool reassurance of a person pursuing his life's work and a free spirit of a young man wandering only to live and love life (37).

Similar perceptions have long been reported in both Western and Eastern traditions. For example, to Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), God was the 'face of faces,' and 'In all faces the face of faces is seen veiled' (Bond 1997, 244). Referring to the divine as the inmost Self, the Hindu *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.5 states that

> A wife loves her husband not for his own sake … but because the Self lives in him; A husband loves his wife not for her own sake … but because the Self lives in her … . Everything is loved not for its own sake, but because the Self lives in it. (Easwaran 1987, 36)

Through the process of theistic sanctification, the range of the sacred expands from the vertical to the horizontal, moving in essence 'from heaven to earth.' Non-theistic sanctification likewise extends the range of the sacred.

Non-theistic sanctification: perceiving sacred qualities in life

While theistic sanctification involves seeing parts of reality as *manifestations* of God, non-theistic sanctification involves the process of imbuing seemingly ordinary aspects of life with *qualities* frequently associated with notions of the divine, God, and transcendent reality. It is useful to think of these sacred qualities as 'adjectives' that are often used to facilitate an understanding of the divine. However, these adjectives can be applied to

other objects. They can be peeled off theistic nouns such as God and attached to other parts of life (i.e., new 'nouns') and, when this process occurs, the new object takes on a different meaning. We label this process non-theistic sanctification because, as we note shortly, the sacred qualities are not inherently theistic in nature; even so, both theists and nontheists can engage in non-theistic sanctification.

Non-theistic sanctification is not a new idea. Durkheim (1915/1965) described this process as one of metamorphosis through the religious imagination. Although society, Durkheim believed, was the agent responsible for the metamorphosis of objects from ordinary to sacred, this process must also operate at the individual level of perception and experience. Jones (2002) put it this way: 'The sacred is not necessarily a unique and special object or domain split off from the rest of life, but is rather the world of ordinary objects experienced in a particular way' (6 l). The 'particular way' Jones speaks of involves the perception that certain objects contain divine-like or sacred qualities.

By sacred qualities we are referring to attributes that are often associated with the divine, God, and transcendent reality. Through a building block approach (cf., Taves 2013) involving a review of personal narratives, scholarly writings, and empirical investigations, Pargament and Mahoney (2005) and Pargament (2007) delineated a set of sacred qualities: transcendence, ultimacy, and boundlessness. In the selection process, they looked for qualities that were applicable to the variety of constructs that lie in the core of the sacred (i.e., divine, God, and transcendent reality). In addition, they searched for qualities that could conceivably transfer to other parts of life. They did not select qualities that might apply to only one core sacred construct. For instance, they did not identify omnipotence and omniscience as sacred qualities because historically these terms have been exclusively reserved for deities. They also focused on qualities *of* the sacred rather than particular beliefs (e.g., dogma, canon) and practices (e.g., rituals, worship) *about* the sacred. Finally, they focused on qualities of the sacred that could conceivably transfer to other domains.

Transcendence, ultimacy, and boundlessness are not necessarily the only attributes that might qualify as sacred (e.g., see Anttonen 2000); they are instead a starting point. Neither are these qualities necessarily fully universal or expressed to the same extent across individuals and contexts. Oman (2013a) cautions that concepts or qualities related to the sacred may vary to some extent from culture to culture. Drawing on the work of Saler (2000) and Rosch (1973), he suggests that cultural concepts related to the sacred may often display a 'family resemblance' or 'prototype' structure which is characterized not by strict definitions involving necessary and sufficient elements, but by 'typicality features' that are commonly present, without any single feature being necessary or sufficient for membership in the category (Oman 2013a, 29; Saler 2000, xi). For our purposes here, the notions of family resemblance and prototype not only allow for the articulation of what we hope can function as a reasonably cross-culturally prototypical common set of sacred qualities, but also provide a rationale for examining these qualities across cultures and contexts.

Below we consider these three core sacred qualities in a bit more detail (Pargament 2007).

Transcendence

Transcendence, the first sacred quality, is a defining attribute of divinity according to virtually every religious tradition. In the Hebrew Bible God is described as above all:

'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts' (Isaiah 55: 9). A similar description is presented in the New Testament: 'You are from below: I am from above: you are of this world; I am not of this world' (John 8: 23). Although Buddhism is arguably nontheistic, the Buddha is regularly described as the incomparable one, exalted beyond all comparison. In Hinduism, Brahman is said to be 'one without a second' (*ekam evadvitiyam*, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.2.1).

Perceptions of transcendence involve the sense that some things are 'set apart' from others; that there is something altogether out of the ordinary in objects or experiences. Theologian Rudolf Otto captured this sense of transcendence when he described some experiences as 'wholly other … quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible and the familiar' (1917/1928, 26). Because of its extraordinary character, transcendence seems to fall outside our usual rational understandings, lying 'quite outside the limits of the canny' (Otto 1917/1928, 26). Transcendence then is felt to be impossible to put into words, and a mystery that can never be fully revealed. Thus, the sacred quality of transcendence often goes hand-in-hand with the sense of mystery and ineffability. A number of theorists and researchers have defined self-transcendence as a universal human capacity (e.g., Cloninger, Svrakic, and Przybeck 1993; Hood 2006; Piedmont 1999).

Ultimacy

The second quality, ultimacy, refers to those things that are perceived to be carriers of absolute truth or what is 'really, real' (cf., Geertz 1966). Ultimacy is another defining attribute of the divine. Jesus tells his followers: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6) and Jews ask God: 'Teach me your ways, O Lord, that I may live according to your truth' (Psalms 86:11). The Buddha is often described as the bearer of truth. Similarly, Brahman within Hinduism refers to ultimate reality, the highest universal principle that unifies all of existence (e.g., *satyam jñānam anantam brahma*, *Taitirrīya Upaniṣad* 2.1.1), experienceable as the truth of truths (*satyasya satyam*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.1.20; Radhakrishnan, 56, 190).

The perception of ultimacy rests on the assumption that what lies at the surface of everyday experience obscures deeper truths. As Tillich (1957) put it, holy things are not holy in and of themselves rather they point to ultimate concern. Similarly, Eliade (1957) noted that once an object is sanctified, a window is opened through which people can envision a deeper reality: 'For those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into supernatural reality' (12). Oman (2013a) points out this sense of an unseen but very real multi-layered universe, one containing an underworld and an overworld, has been a universal feature of human culture since Neolithic times. In a somewhat parallel, non-theistic, modern day form, this sense of a multi-layered universe may express itself among scientists through the conviction that what is manifest hides a more profound latent reality. Most notably, Einstein (1956) voiced this sentiment:

> A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty - it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man (7).

Interestingly, when perceived as ultimate, it is the everyday world that becomes more superficial, less revealing, and less real than the hidden world of the sacred.

Boundlessness

Boundlessness is a third sacred quality. The divine is frequently described as beyond time and space. According to western theistic traditions, God is omnipresent, eternal, and everlasting. 'He neither begets nor is born,' according to the Koran (Surah 112). Similarly, within Hindusim, Brahman, as the inner Self (*ātman*), is said to be formless, eternal, and without beginning or end (*arūpam, nityam, anādy anantam mahataḥ, Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.3.15). Buddha reportedly said: 'There is, O monks, an Unborn, neither become nor created nor formed. Were there not, there would be no deliverance from the formed, the made, the compounded' (quoted in Smith and Novak 2003, 54)

Like the gods, some aspects of life can be perceived as timeless and spaceless. One of the most famous examples of this form of perception comes from the poetry of Blake (1977) who wrote: 'To see a World in a Grain of Sand; And Heaven in a Wild Flower; Hold Infinity in the palm of your hands; And Eternity in an Hour' (506). Millenia ago, Plato (1951) also wrote of the timeless quality of the ideal of Beauty: 'Beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes; next it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another' (93). More recently, Elkins (1998) described the quality of boundlessness similarly: 'When we stand before a painting or listen to a beautiful piece of music, sometimes eternity breaks in, limitedness falls away, and we find ourselves in an eternal present' (126). Elkins words here imply a connection between boundlessness and mysticism, and in fact, mysticism has been defined, in part, by some qualities closely related to boundlessness: the experience of feeling outside of temporal and spatial constraints, and the experience of merging oneself into a larger whole in which all things are interconnected (Hood 1975). Finally, life itself can be seen as boundless, even by those who are not religious or spiritual. Psychiatrists Lifton and Olson (1974) described a variety of ways through which people develop a sense of 'symbolic immortality' reflecting a 'relatedness to all that comes before and all that follows' (34). These modes include not only traditional theological concepts of life after death, but a creative mode in which people experience a sense of continuity through writing, teaching, art, and other human activities that have an impact on society that last beyond the temporal lives of individuals.

It is important to stress that theistic and non-theistic sanctification are not mutually exclusive – many people perceive aspects of life as both manifestations of God and replete with sacred qualities. Through both interrelated processes, people can perceive sacredness within a wide array of objects. But it does not follow that 'the sacred' is ill-defined. The sacred is not defined by the objects that become sacred but by the distinctive way in which the objects are perceived, as manifestations of God and/or as objects of transcendence, ultimacy, and boundlessness.

Once an aspect of life is infused with sacred character through the process of sanctification, it is transformed in the mind of the perceiver. It becomes more than an object of instrumental secular purpose and passion. Geertz (1966) commented on this point using religious terminology: 'A man can indeed be said to be "religious" about golf, but

not merely if he pursues it with passion and plays it on Sundays: he must also see it as symbolic of some transcendent truths' (13). This perspective offers an important counterpoint to tendencies among social scientists to reduce religious and spiritual phenomena to psychological and social processes (Pargament 2013). In this vein, Tillich (1957) cautioned against treating symbols of faith as simply secular processes, arguing that 'they have a genuine standing in the human mind, just as science and art have' (53). Durkheim (1915) too maintained that sacred objects are irreducible to any other phenomenon. As we will see shortly, the process of sanctification helps account for the distinctive nature of sacred objects; by perceiving divinity or sacred qualities within seemingly secular aspects of life, these objects take on a special meaning and power.

Criticisms of the sacred in scholarly study

A number of criticisms have been raised about the study of the sacred in general, and a psychological approach to the sacred in particular. With our definition of the sacred in hand, we now turn to three of these criticisms.

The unjustified assumption of the ontological validity of the sacred

The first criticism is that the term 'sacred' is theological in nature and refers to a religious reality that falls outside the pale of scholarly methods. Pointing to the works of Otto (1917/1928) who described the experience of the numinous in response to the apprehension of the Wholly Other and Eliade (1957) who spoke of the sacred revealing itself to people through a 'hierophany' or eruption into the world, critics such as Penner (1990) argue that discussions of the sacred rest on the unjustified assumption of its ontological validity, that there is in fact something truly sacred embedded in the object of interest. From this critical vantage point, Paden (1991) noted, 'the sacred' refers to an 'a priori religious reality – to an object that is transcendent, mysterious, wholly other, unknowable, and which therefore is not ultimately an object for analysis' (10).

In response to this criticism, it must be made clear that psychology has little if anything to contribute to debates about the ultimate reality of God, religious claims, the sacred, or any other phenomenon for that matter. But that does not disqualify religious and spiritual topics from psychological study. A psychological perspective on the sacred shifts the focus of interest from the reality of God or the qualities that are actually present or inherent in a sacred object to the ways God is understood and the process of perceiving sacredness in an object. To put it more poetically, the focus shifts to seeing the world through a sacred lens. Perceptions of the sacred – the ways the sacred is understood and experienced – represent legitimate phenomena of interest. These perceptions (including perceptions of the reality of the sacred) neither confirm nor disconfirm their ontological validity. To believe in God or perceive sacredness in some aspect of life does not mean that God exists or the object is actually emanating sacredness. Conversely, not to believe in God or perceive sacredness in some aspect of life does not mean that God does not exist or the object is in fact not emanating sacredness. From a psychological perspective, the ontological question is one that we simply cannot answer. However, in spite of this limitation, we will try to show that perceptions of the sacred represent a fruitful topic for psychological study.

Too broad a construct

According to a second more recent criticism 'the sacred' is too broad a construct to be suitable for serious study. This is a criticism directed against the assertion that the sacred encompasses not only concepts of God, the divine, and transcendental reality but also a wider ring of objects. In the introductory chapter to the *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion, and Spirituality*, editors Paloutzian and Park (2013) point to the exceptional diversity of objects that can be given the label 'sacred,' citing the well-known quote by Emile Durkheim (1915/1965): 'By sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything can be sacred' (52). They go on to argue that the multiplicity of sacred objects renders the sacred difficult if not impossible to define: 'If, however, any object, motivation, or kind of experience can be regarded as the sacred, as many definitions of the sacred tend to assume … then there is no agreement on what the essential ingredients of the sacred are' (Paloutzian and Park 2013, 9). They maintain that the sacred then becomes whatever people say it is to them, and loses any common meaning or ability to serve as a key phenomenon of interest for religious and spiritual study. Paloutzian and Park warn against attempts to delineate the 'singular' attribute of the sacred, but they do not pursue the idea of identifying a common set of sacred ingredients. Instead, they prefer a functional approach that ironically enough locates a singular function – meaning-making – at the center of religious and spiritual life. We will see, however, that purely functional approaches are accompanied by significant limitations.

Paloutzian and Park (2013) are correct in pointing to the potentially diverse array of sacred objects. It does not follow, however, that we cannot discern a set of key ingredients of the sacred. To use an analogy from popular culture, there are many flavors of ice cream (a popular ice cream company in the US, Baskin and Robbins, became famous for advertising 31 flavors). In spite of its many flavors, we can still identify some common characteristics of ice cream (e.g., sweet, frozen, and creamy) and it is useful to speak of ice cream as an overarching category of objects, as when someone suggests 'let's go out and get some ice cream.' Similarly, although the sacred can be perceived in many objects, it is possible to identify a common or 'prototypical' core of ingredients, as Oman (2013a) has suggested, and it is also useful to be able to speak of the sacred as a general class of objects in spite of its many varieties. We articulated three of these ingredients or sacred qualities – transcendence, ultimacy, boundlessness – in the prior section. Shortly, we will examine some of the significant progress that has been made in measuring these sacred qualities. It is also important to add that the potential diversity of sacred objects does not imply that they are simply random reflections of individual preference. Though 'anything can be sacred' as Durkheim (1915/1965) noted, perceptions of the sacred, like other perceptions, are delimited and shaped into a finite number of distinctive forms by a variety of individual, social, and cultural factors.

Intrapsychic and of limited scholarly value

A third criticism targets problems associated with a psychological approach to the sacred (and spirituality more generally). A psychological approach is said to be merely intrapsychic and subjective and therefore of only limited value to more

general religious and spiritual study. Ammerman (2013) has spoken to this tendency among sociologists in particular to focus on organizational indicators of religiousness and 'relegate' the more subjective side (e.g., spirituality, sacred) to the domains of psychology and religious studies. In this vein, she cites Bender (2010) who writes that 'when we "define a phenomenon as an interior individual experience" we place it conceptually beyond sociological explanation' (259).

It is true that a psychological approach to religion and spirituality tends to focus largely on the individual level of analysis. However, this understanding does not need to be and should not be disconnected from social and cultural factors. For instance, we can examine beliefs in and perceptions of the sacred that are held collectively. In addition, we can think of the relationship that is formed between individuals and the sacred (Mahoney 2013); that is, the ways people develop, conserve, and transform their relationships with what they hold sacred. We can also study perceptions of the sacred in context. These perceptions are not divorced from cultural, social, theological, and other psychological matters. Through various institutions – family, educational, and religious – as well as personal experience, people are taught to hold certain objects as sacred. In this vein, Paden (1988) has noted that the world's religions can be in part distinguished according to what they encourage their adherents to hold sacred, be it the Torah within Judaism, the Qur'an within Islam, the divinity of Jesus Christ within Christianity, or temples which are homes to gods and goddesses within Hinduism. In a reciprocal way, perceptions of the sacred also have important implications not only for the individual perceiver, but also for his or her family, institutions, community, and culture. It follows that the study of the sacred is not the exclusive province of any field. Rather, it calls for multi-disciplinary study, understanding, and exchange.

Having addressed some of the criticisms that have been leveled at studies of the sacred, we now consider some of the implications of our understanding of the sacred for definitions of the larger concepts of religion and spirituality.

Sharpening the meanings of religion and spirituality

Scholars in the study of religion and spirituality have not reached a consensus on the definitions of these foundational terms (Oman 2013a; Pargament et al. 2013). This problem is not unique to this area of scholarship; other disciplines also struggle with arriving at some agreement on key terms. Fortunately, however, complete consensus is unnecessary for a field to progress. Even so, it is difficult to engage in a productive dialogue about religion and spirituality without some shared sense of the meaning of these constructs.

One way to lend greater clarity and perhaps uniformity to the meanings of religion and spirituality is to move the sacred to the foreground in definitions of both constructs. Below we describe three advantages to positioning the sacred in a more central place in definitions of religion and spirituality.

Articulating the distinctiveness of religion and spirituality

The distinctive substance of religion

Definitions of religion generally focus on a substantive set of beliefs, practices, experiences, and relationships directed toward a divine being. For example, Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi

(1975) defined religion as 'a system of beliefs in a divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such a power' (1). By focusing on those beliefs and practices that center around a divine entity, these definitions offer the advantage of greater precision and sharper boundaries. They make it clearer where religion starts and stops. However, this emphasis has been criticized as unduly restrictive, excluding non-traditional and non-theistic religious expressions.

A number of religious scholars have tried to broaden the religious sphere by introducing concepts such as 'invisible religion' (Luckmann 1967), 'implicit religion' (Bailey 1998), and 'civil religion' (Bellah 1967), though without explicit linkage to the sacred. Integrating the sacred into definitions of religion may offer a more direct way to mitigate the concerns raised about the narrowness of substantive religious perspectives. A study of religion organized around the construct of the sacred opens itself up to a focus on not only concepts of divinity, higher powers, and transcendent reality, but also to a diverse set of objects that can become sanctified and the beliefs and practices that focus on these objects. When seen as manifestations of God or imbued with sacred qualities, topics that range from environmentalism, violence, and terrorism to the virtues, self-development, marriage and family, and work all fall beneath the religious umbrella and become relevant phenomena of interest for religious study. What lends unity to these diverse expressions and religion as a whole? Paden (1992) said it well: the sacred is 'the overarching, common denominator of religious life' (72). Although other institutions – familial, educational, medical, and judicial – are also concerned about sacred matters, no other institution has as its primary substantive focus the sacred.

Substantive definitions of religion have also been criticized for their static, dry qualities – a lack of soul. In their focus on a set of beliefs, practices, experiences, and relationships, they may not do justice to the passion, motivation, and drive that are central to life. This criticism, as well as broader religious trends, have led a number of scholars in the field to expand their focus from religion to spirituality. As one writer noted: 'spirituality puts back into religion just what science threatened to remove: "spirit"' (Farina 1989, 20). It is important to add, however, that many people may pursue their spiritual quest outside of an established religious context.

The distinctive function of spirituality

Most definitions of spirituality are functional rather than substantive. Here the emphasis shifts from the 'what's' of religion to the 'why's' and the 'what fors' of spirituality; that is, the purposes it serves. Spirituality has been defined in terms of a variety of functions: from connectedness and personal growth to meaning and purpose in life. Although these definitions of spirituality are more dynamic than their substantive counterparts in the religious arena, they suffer from a lack of clear focus and boundaries, what Spilka (1993) called 'fuzziness.'

One functional definition of spirituality drawn from the 2009 US Consensus Committee on Palliative Care illustrates this point. Spirituality is defined as 'the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred' (Puchalski et al. 2009, 643). This definition conveys the sense of animation and movement that drives spirituality, but it begs the question of what constitutes a spiritual purpose. Although meaning and purpose are highlighted as goals of spiritual life, the

question arises: What makes meaning spiritual? People may find meaning through many activities: work, volunteerism, family, military service, psychotherapy, golf, yoga, and so forth. Are we to assume that these are all inherently spiritual? Describing meaningful pursuits as by definition spiritual may add luster to a variety of values and activities, but the label of spirituality may ultimately lose any value unless it is somehow connected to what writers have described as the essence of spirituality, a motivation to seek out the sacred (Pargament 1997). In the definition above, however, the term 'sacred' appears almost as an afterthought at the end of a list of possible functions. This brings to mind Berger's (1974) caution that in functional definitions, the special transcendent nature of the phenomenon is 'flattened out … absorbed into a night in which all cats are grey' (129). He goes on even further to suggest that these definitions support a secular worldview, providing a 'quasiscientific legitimation of the avoidance of transcendence' (128, emphasis in original).

The term 'sacred' can help sharpen the meaning of spirituality. For example, Hill et al. (2000) and Pargament (1997) center their definitions of this term around a search for the sacred. From this perspective, spirituality is a dynamic process in which people try to develop, conserve, and at times transform a relationship with what is perceived as sacred over the course of the lifespan. What makes this definition of spirituality special is its distinctive focus on the sacred as an ultimate end in living. People can take many different pathways to important destinations in their lives, but the journey would qualify as spiritual only if the destinations are imbued with sacred character. From Frankl's (1965) perspective, the spiritual individual experiences life not as a task but as a mission or calling that emerges out of a deeper transcendent reality.

In sum, a focus on the sacred helps crystallize the distinctive meanings of both religion and spirituality. Religion is defined by its special focus on beliefs, practices, experiences, relationships, and institutions that are sacred in character. Spirituality is defined by its special life motivating force – the quest for the sacred. It is important to recognize that social scientists, from Durkheim to Freud to Geertz, have explained religious and spiritual phenomena in terms of presumably more basic biological, psychological, and social processes. While there has been tremendous value to this work, a focus on perceptions of the sacred raises another possibility worth considering, the possibility that religion and spirituality represent a distinctive, partially irreducible dimension of life, one that deserves more direct study.

Clarifying areas of commonality and divergence in meanings of religion and spirituality

In the last 30 years, the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' have become increasingly polarized (Pargament et al. 2013). Increasingly, religion is used to define established beliefs and practices rooted in a traditional institutional context. Increasingly, spirituality is seen as an individualized personal expression. The concept of the sacred offers a way to articulate points of commonality and departure in these terms. The definitional work of Pargament et al. (2013) speaks most explicitly to this point. In defining spirituality as 'the search for the sacred' (14), they assert that the sacred quest is the primary function – the heart and soul – of spiritual life. Religion is defined as 'the search for significance that occurs within the context of established institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality' (15). The

search for significance refers to the pathways people take to reach significant destinations; although these end-points include purposes often mentioned in social science literature, such as emotional comfort, self-regulation, social connectedness, meaning, self-development, the raison d'etre for religion is to help adherents develop and foster a relationship with the sacred. Thus, religion unfolds in the milieu of established institutions explicitly designed to facilitate the search for the sacred.

From the perspective of these definitions, religion and spirituality converge on their common concern about sacred matters. However, there are also important points of departure between these two constructs. Religion is narrower than spirituality in terms of its institutionally based context, but it is broader than spirituality in its functions; religion can serve 'intrinsic' or 'extrinsic' functions (e.g., social, personal) to use the conceptualization of Allport (1950). Spirituality is narrower than religion in its function (i.e., the sacred), but broader than religion in its context because it can be manifested within or outside of an established institutional framework.

Increasing the sensitivity and specificity of religion and spirituality

In his review and evaluation of these definitions, Oman (2013a) has suggested that a good definition has sensitivity and specificity; it is neither too narrow nor too broad. Integrating the concept of the sacred into these definitions, we believe, helps steer clear of these twin dangers. The sacred is a broad enough construct to encompass a wide array of salient religious and spiritual phenomena. It goes beyond traditional institutionally bound manifestations to incorporate the varied non-traditional, non-theistic expressions that mark religious and spiritual life today (Wuthnow 2003). At the same time, the sacred is bounded by its focus on the divine, God, transcendent reality, and aspects of life (e.g., family, the environment, social justice, the virtues, strivings) that have been perceived as manifestations of God or infused with divine-like attributes.

We have paid careful attention to a number of issues that arise in conceptualizing the sacred, religion, and spirituality. But from the pragmatic view of James (1907/1975), the value of this perspective rests ultimately on its fruitfulness. In the spirit of James, we turn now to these fruits.

A method for measuring perceptions of the sacred

Scholar Capps (1977) once noted that religious and spiritual phenomena can be elusive and difficult to study not because they are separate from ordinary experience but because they are interwoven into ordinary experience. A psychological approach provides a method for bringing what may be embedded in the background of experience more to the foreground through an empirical method for studying perceptions of the sacred. A number of researchers have shown that these perceptions can be measured reliably.

Many studies have examined various images and representations of the sacred core from various theoretical perspectives. The large majority of this work has centered around theistic representations of this core. Cognitive views of God have been assessed by scales such as Benson and Spilka's (1973) Loving and Controlling God scales and Gorsuch's (1968) Adjective Ratings of God scale. More emotion-based representations of God

have been measured by the God Image Inventory (Lawrence 1997), which assesses God's Influence, Providence, Presence, Challenge, Acceptance, and Benevolence. Rowatt and Kirkpatrick's (2002) Attachment-to-God scale draws from Bowlby's attachment theory to assess the degree to which the individual has a secure, avoidant, or anxious/ambivalent relationship with God. Hall and Edwards's (2002) Spiritual Assessment Inventory measures Awareness of God, Realistic Acceptance of God, Disappointment with God, Grandiosity, and Instability in Relationship with God. Each of these scales has demonstrated evidence of reliability and validity.

Newer studies have also shown promise in measuring how life in general and in its more specific aspects is sanctified theistically and nontheistically. With respect to life in general, Doehring et al. (2009) developed a Perceiving Sacredness in Life Scale that provides an efficient way of assessing both theistic and non-theistic ways of sanctifying life as a whole. Cloninger, Svrakic, and Przybeck (1993) and Piedmont (1999) created Spiritual Transcendence Scales that tap into processes akin to non-theistic sanctification of the cosmos and life as a whole.

The measurement of specific forms of the sacred that lie in the sacred ring is not necessarily simple or straightforward. As Demerath (2000) has pointed out, Durkheim, Weber, and James were all well-aware of the variety of ways the sacred can be experienced by individuals and collectives. And the sacred continues to take many forms in the evolving religious landscape. He writes: 'Charting the sacred involves an exploration of inner space that is every bit as challenging as the astronomer's exploration of a continually expanding outer space' (4). Mahoney and her colleagues have pioneered the development of measures to assess theistic and non-theistic sanctification of different aspects of life, including marriage, parenting, strivings, the environment, and sexuality (for review see Mahoney, Pargament, and Hernandez 2013). They find that, although the two forms of sanctification can be distinguished from each other empirically, they are significantly intercorrelated; as noted earlier, many people engage in sanctification both theistically and nontheistically. Others have extended this work to assess sanctification in the domains of work (Walker et al. 2008), social justice (Todd, Houston, and Odahl-Ruan 2014), dreams (Phillips and Pargament 2002), and critical moments in caregiving relationships (Pargament et al. 2014). Davis et al. (2015) developed and validated a Sources of Spirituality scale that assesses Theistic spirituality, and the sanctification of Nature, Humanity, the Self, and a Transcendent force outside of the physical order. Through mixed qualitative and quantitative analyses of a religiously diverse sample in the US, Ammerman (2013) identified three 'packages' of spirituality related to concepts and perceptions of the sacred. The Theistic Package emphasizes the individual's beliefs about deities. An Extra-Theistic Package is quite similar to the concept of the non-theistic sanctification of diverse aspects of life. And the Ethical Package involves the sanctification of virtues and efforts to bring greater compassion to the world.

Using measures and methods such as these allows us to examine how often people report perceiving the sacred in their lives. With respect to theistic representations of the sacred core, beliefs in God remain commonplace in the world. In a survey of 30 countries, the percentages of those who report some level of belief in God ranged from 48 percent in the former East Germany to 99 percent in the Philippines (Smith 2012).

In terms of the wider ring of sacred objects, we might expect relatively low levels of sanctification today, at least in western cultures, based on the comments of some

writers. Carl Jung said that 'we have stripped all things of their mystery and numinosity; nothing is holy any longer' (Jung 1964, 84). Similarly, Thomas Moore wrote: 'the great malady of the 20th century … is "loss of soul"' (1992, xi). Although there are clear signs of secularization in western culture, empirical data suggest that many people have not experienced any clearly obvious 'loss of soul.' For example, in terms of the sanctification of life as a whole, the majority of participants from a national sample in the US agreed with theistic sanctification items, such as 'I see God's presence in all of life' (75 percent), and non-theistic sanctification items, such as 'I experience something more sacred than simply material existence' (76 percent, Doehring and Clarke 2002). Turning to the sanctification of more specific life domains, Mahoney, Pargament, and DeMaris (2009) reported high levels of sanctification of marriage in a sample of married American couples experiencing the birth of their first child. Eighty one percent of wives and 74 percent of husbands agreed that 'I sense God's presence in my relationship with my spouse.' Eighty four percent of wives and 78 percent of husbands agreed that 'my marriage connects my spouse and me to something greater than ourselves.'

These relatively high levels of prevalence argue against the notion that the process of secularization has led to a major decline in the perception of various aspects of life as sacred in the US context. Demerath (2000) has suggested that ongoing processes of 'sacralization' offer a counterbalance to the forces of secularization, and goes on to recommend broadening our vision when we search for the sacred: 'Too often we look for the sacred under a religious street lamp, when we should be searching amongst other experiences in the middle of the block' (4).

Of course, the degree to which these empirical findings apply to other contexts and cultures remains unanswered. Interestingly, some evidence suggests that perceptions of sacredness can be found even among atheists. Listen, for example, to the sacred qualities of transcendence and boundlessness that run through the way one atheist from Sweden describes in nature:

> Whatever happens in the world for me or others, nature is still there, it keeps going … the leaves fall off, new ones appear, somewhere there is a pulse that keeps going … It is a spiritual feeling if we can use this word without connecting it to God. (Ahmadi 2006, 73)

One empirical study speaks at least indirectly to this point. In a study of 58 largely secular mental health providers, participants were asked to reflect on the most important moment they had experienced with a patient in the last year. They then rated the degree to which they perceived various sacred qualities in that moment. Overall, 55.5 percent described their important moment as sacred. More specifically, a significant number of mental health providers responded 'very true' to the following items tapping into sacred qualities: 'I felt that I was part of something that was really, real' (65 percent), 'This moment felt set apart from everyday life' (42 percent), and 'I felt that I was in the presence of something larger than myself' (38 percent). The study of perceptions of the sacred among atheists and agnostics represents a potentially fruitful area of investigation.

The sacred as a significant predictor of human behavior

We noted earlier that the ontological reality or truth of the sacred cannot be determined by psychological methods – be it the reality of the core or the actual sacredness of any

aspect of life that is perceived to be an extension of that core. However, perceptions of the sacred, including both concepts of the sacred core and the wider ring of sacred objects, can be evaluated for their pragmatic value according to their ability to predict important aspects of human behavior. Just as we can identify beliefs in and perceptions of the sacred, we can identify certain functions of the sacred and test whether they in fact apply through empirical study. A number of studies have examined several functions which have been theoretically linked to perceptions of the sacred (for more extensive reviews see Mahoney, Pargament, and Hernandez 2013; Pargament 2007; Pargament and Mahoney 2005; Pomerleau, Pargament, and Mahoney 2016). The findings underscore the special meaning and power that perceptions of the sacred hold in peoples' lives.

The sacred serves as an organizing force

Although the sacred refers in part to things that are set apart, it also functions to bind aspects of life together, providing interconnections within individuals and among individuals (Anttonen 2000). In this vein, Geertz (1966) described sacred symbols as sources of coherence and integration in life. [They]

> function to synthesize a people's ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world-view-the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order (3).

Emmons (1999) provided empirical support for this assertion in a study of personal strivings. He had participants list their most important life goals and found that spiritual strivings (e.g., 'discern and follow God's will for my life') were commonplace in their lists. Moreover, spiritual strivings were associated with greater coherence and less conflict within the individual's goal system. Emmons (1999) concluded that spiritual strivings are likely to have a 'primacy within a person's goal hierarchy' (90).

People invest more of themselves in the sacred

Because the sacred refers to matters of deepest significance, people generally invest more of their resources in sacred pursuits. For example, in a study of a US sample of Presbyterians, individuals who perceived the environment as sacred were more likely to invest money in environmental causes (Tarakeshwar et al. 2001). Similarly, workers who described their work as a 'calling' reported fewer absences than those who see their work as a 'job' (Wrzesniewski et al. 1997). In another study of spiritual strivings, Mahoney and colleagues (2005) had a community sample list their most important strivings and then assessed the degree to which each striving was sanctified. Follow-up phone calls were then made to participants who were asked how they were spending their time and energy over the prior 24 hours. The researchers found that people spent more time thinking about and interacting with others around their more highly sanctified strivings. They also indicated greater commitment to and long-term plans to pursue more sanctified strivings. And individuals who sanctify social justice also showed greater commitment to these pursuits (Todd, Houston, and Odahl-Ruan 2014).

People protect and preserve the sacred

As 'precious objects,' sacred parts of life are not to be defiled (Durkheim 1915/1965); rather they are to be treated with special care and respect. There is research support for this assertion. For instance, couples who sanctify their marriages report that they are less likely to engage in destructive communication strategies and more likely to use collaborative problem solving methods (Mahoney et al. 1999). Further, in a study on the transition to parenthood, the more couples sanctified their union, the better both spouses treated each other during videotaped interactions of the couples discussing their top three conflicts (Kusner et al. 2014). Similarly, parents who see their children as gifts from God show more positive parenting skills, greater consistency in parenting, and less parental verbal aggression (Dumas and Nissley-Tsiopinis 2006). College students who sanctify their bodies are also more likely to engage in health-protective activities, such as using seat belts, and less drinking and cigarette smoking (Mahoney et al., 2005).

People react strongly to loss or violation of the sacred

In spite of their best efforts, people occasionally suffer damage or violation of what they hold sacred. Marital infidelity, criminal victimization, sexual abuse, unemployment, an unfortunate accident, acts of violence – events such as these can take on a deeper meaning and elicit stronger emotional and behavioral reactions when they are appraised as sacred losses and violations. For example, following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Mahoney et al. (2002) conducted a survey of college students in New York and Ohio. Students were asked about the degree to which they viewed the attacks as a violation of the sacred. Perceptions of desecration were not unusual; almost half of the students agreed that the attacks were 'both an offense against me and against God.' Views of the 9/11 attacks as a desecration were associated with more symptoms of posttraumatic stress and depression, greater anger, and more willingness to endorse extremist responses, such as the use of nuclear and biological weapons on countries that harbor terrorists. Other studies have linked higher levels of religious prejudice toward outgroups that are seen as representing a threat to the sacred values of the religious ingroup (e.g., Abu-Raiya et al. 2011). Perceptions of sacred loss and violation and strong emotional reactions have also been identified among people facing stressors, including divorce (Krumrei, Mahoney, and Pargament 2011), medical illness (Magyar-Russell et al. 2013), and a variety of other major life events (Pargament et al. 2005).

The sacred serves as a significant resource

Sacred objects, according to LaMothe (1998), are 'vital objects,' with the capacity to soothe, inspire, comfort, empower, connect people to past and future, and generate meaning in life. They are, in short, resources that people can draw on throughout their lives. A number of empirical studies support this point. Working mothers who sanctified their jobs reported more positive affect, less interrole conflict, and greater occupational satisfaction (Hall et al. 2012). A longitudinal study of married couples revealed that those who sanctify sexuality to a greater extent reported greater sexual and marital satisfaction, and more frequent sexual intercourse one year later after controlling for initial levels of

marital satisfaction (Hernandez, Mahoney, and Pargament 2011). Individuals who see their strivings in life as more sacred also describe these strivings as more meaningful and report that they gain greater joy and happiness from these strivings (Mahoney et al., 2005). Mental health practitioners and clients who imbue important moments in treatment with sacred qualities describe greater progress in treatment, a stronger working therapeutic alliance, and greater meaning in life (Pargament et al. 2014).

The sacred elicits spiritual emotions

Consistent with the seminal writing of Otto (1917/1928) who described the mysterium – a set of fascinating and overwhelming emotions that accompany consciousness of the divine – empirical research has linked the sacred to powerful emotions. For instance, Haidt (2003) induced a sense of sacredness by having some participants watch clips of Mother Teresa and others watch video clips of emotionally neutral material and a comedy sketch. Those who watched the Mother Teresa video reported more experiences of emotional elevation, including warm, pleasant, and 'tingling' feelings in their chests. They also described more feelings of altruism toward others. Feelings of gratitude have also often been linked with a sense of God's presence, and these emotions have been tied in turn to improvements in subjective well-being (Emmons and McCullough 2003). Otto (1917/1928) also described the mysterium in terms of more fearful, dreadful emotions, such as awe. Although a few writers have speculated on these emotions (e.g., Keltner and Haidt 2003), there is scant research as yet on this potentially darker emotional side of sacred experience.

 This body of research is still in its early stages of development. It is limited by its focus on western, largely Christian samples. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, these investigations are promising and underscore the value of psychological studies of the sacred and sanctification. Perceptions of the sacred appear to have potent meaning and significant implications for a variety of aspects of individual and social functioning.

The sacred as a product of multi-level forces

To the most religiously and spiritually minded, the sense of the sacred is a direct response to a divine revelation; it is the apprehension of an actual supernatural eruption into the world (cf., Eliade 1957) or an ongoing sense of divine immanence within all things. Whether the individual is responding to a presence that is ontologically real cannot be determined through psychological methods, as we have stressed in this chapter. We can, however, examine other potential sources of sacred perceptions, though the task may be challenging. Ammerman (2013) has noted that people in western culture may be largely unaware of the roots of their spiritual beliefs and practices because these expressions are often seen as the end-result of a highly individualized journey. 'The underlying cultural patterns are there,' she writes, 'but they are obscured by the "rhetoric of individualism"' (272).

 Although empirical studies are largely lacking in this area, theoretical writings, some admittedly speculative, suggest that perceptions of the sacred grow out of a multi-level set of forces.

Individual forces

At the individual level, theorists have described a propensity to perceive the sacred that is basically hard-wired into us from birth. Neuroscientists Newberg and Waldman (2006) have asserted that: 'We are biologically inclined to ponder the deepest nature of our being and the deepest secrets of the universe … born to believe' (xvii-xviii). Psychoanalytic theorist, Loewald (1978) has also maintained that even the youngest child appears to sense sacred qualities in the world, such as unity and timelessness. Similarly, an emerging body of research in cognitive-developmental psychology suggests that, from the earliest age, children manifest a capacity to conceive of the sacred, an immaterial spirit, and an afterlife as distinctive entities (Barrett and Zahl 2013).

Situational forces

Even ordinary life events can elicit a sense of sacredness as theologian Buechner (1992) described:

> Taking your children to school and kissing your wife goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it (2).

In a survey of a US sample, McReady (1975) found that a sense of spiritual connection was elicited by situations that ranged from the aesthetic (listening to music, creative work) to the relational (intimacy, lovemaking). However, major life events may be especially likely to trigger perceptions of sacredness. The events may be positive, such as a marriage or birth of a child, or negative as in the case of the death of a loved one or a life trauma. Events like these may confront the individual with human frailty and finitude and elicit a shift in focus to more ultimate concerns. Pargament (1997) has found that major life stressors are linked to religious coping efforts to understand and deal with the events.

Religious forces

Hood (1995) notes that every child is born into a religious context that provides a 'foundational reality,' a way of seeing what is sacred. This 'reality' is passed on through religious stories, religious rituals and practices, and religious figures who model through their behavior what parts of life hold sacred value (see Oman 2013b). Berger (1969) wrote that: 'In the religious view of reality, all phenomena point toward that which transcends them, and this transcendence actively impinges from all sides on the empirical sphere of human existence' (94). Although religious traditions share a concern with transcendence and immanence, they differ in the ways they see and emphasize the sacred expressing itself (Paden 1988). For example, Christians are expected to emulate the Godly virtues, such as kindness, humility, temperance, and charity. Jews are taught to see the Sabbath as 'holiness in time' and a day that God set apart from others (Heschel 1986). Muslims are taught to preface any significant action with the phrase, Bissmallah al rahman al rahim (In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the most Merciful) to imbue endeavors with divine meaning and purpose (Sardar 2011). Indigenous peoples are encouraged to revere the sacred in living things and the physical world (Black Elk 1972).

Social-cultural forces

Religions are not the sole source of beliefs and perceptions about the sacred, as Demerath (2000) has pointed out. Human understandings about sacredness are firmly rooted in collective life (Durkheim 1915). Through many cultural vehicles (e.g., literature, family, educational institutions, and popular culture), societies imprint their views of the sacred onto people collectively and individually. For example, over 200 years ago, in an effort to win support for the American revolution, Alexander Hamilton couched the struggle for human rights in the language of the sacred: 'The sacred rights of mankind … are written, as with a sunbeam, in the whole volume of human nature by the hand of the divinity itself and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power' (cited in Chernow 2005, 92). It is important to acknowledge the particularly critical role families play in passing on spiritual beliefs and practices through modeling and other relational dynamics (Mahoney 2013; Oman 2013b). Considerable evidence suggests that the spiritual beliefs of children and adolescents are similar to those of their parents (Smith with Denton 2005). Moreover, children's concepts of the divine generally correspond to those of their parents (Kirkpatrick 2005). Finally, we should note that even secularized societies pass on concepts and perspectives on the sacred; within more secularized societies, those who do not believe in God have a clear idea about the God they do not believe in (Jones 1991).

In sum, views and perceptions of the sacred are nested in multiple individual, situations, and socio-cultural layers. Although the emphasis here has been on the forces that shape individual perceptions of the sacred, it is important to recognize that the relationships among these constitutive forces are reciprocal. Just as institutions and cultures shape spiritual perception and experience, institutions and cultures are shaped by spiritual perception and experiences. It would be no exaggeration to say that the epochal spiritual stories and encounters reported by figures such as Abraham, Jesus, Muhammed, Buddha, Krishna, and Joseph Smith literally changed the world.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have bracketed off questions of the ontological validity of the sacred and focused instead on the contributions of a psychological approach to sacred study. We have suggested that psychological theory and research on this topic offers: a clarification of the meaning of the sacred; new knowledge about sanctification – the process through which people come to perceive the sacred in daily life; a response to criticisms that have been raised about the pursuit of the scientific study of the sacred; a sharper perspective on the meanings of religion and spirituality; a method for measuring sanctification; knowledge about the ways perceptions of the sacred predict important aspects of human behavior, and; an understanding of the sacred as a product of psychological, social, institutional, cultural, and situational forces.

The concept of the sacred, we believe, lends both focus and breadth, specificity and sensitivity, to the study of religion and spirituality (Oman 2013a). It highlights the value of spiritual and religious theory and research in its own right, not to be subsumed within other related areas of interest, such as positive psychology, existential psychology, and humanistic psychology. It also enlarges the field to encompass the 'many spiritualities' in the US and world, both theistically and non-theistically based (Farina 1989, 30). Empirical studies have demonstrated the pragmatic value of the sacred in efforts to understand a variety of

human behaviors: motivation, strivings, commitment, coping, health-related activities, marital and family functioning, emotionality, and discrimination, violence, and terrorism. Admittedly, the lion's share of studies of the sacred have been rooted in western cultures, so it remains to be seen how well this line of work generalizes to religious and spiritual research in other contexts. However, a few non-western psychologists have suggested there is merit to this direction of study. For example, according to a leading figure in Indian psychology: 'There is a general consensus between Indian and Western perspectives that the common ground between religion and spirituality is the sacred' (Rao 2014, 4). Similarly, a Muslim psychologist has grounded studies of Islamic experiential religion in the definition of spirituality as a search for the sacred (Ghorbani et al. 2014).

Although it was not a focus of this paper, studies of the sacred also provide a foundation for practical efforts to help people grappling with serious problems (Pargament 2007). For example, in a clinical context, assessment of what clients hold sacred can help them identify their core spiritual beliefs and values and the pathways they take to realize their significant goals. In addition, the concept of the sacred can offer a useful perspective on serious psychological problems, such as addictions, unswerving devotion to fanatical leaders, and violence which could be understood as an idolatrous elevation of 'preliminary concerns' to sacred concerns (cf., Tillich 1957) or a product of conflating human constructions of the sacred with their absolute reality (Neville 1965). Furthermore, a focus on the sacred can assist in tailoring helping efforts to particular religious groups. For example, to help terminally ill Muslim patients achieve a 'good death,' Tayeb et al. (2010) encourage palliative care professionals to be sensitive to the values and resources that are held sacred by Muslims (e.g., avoiding physical pollution before and after death, dying in a sacred place such as a mosque if possible, reciting chapters from the Qur'an).

Ultimately, the value of a psychological approach to the sacred will rest on not only the knowledge that it generates, but its ability to raise new questions that shape future inquiry in productive directions (Kuhn 1996). The topic of the sacred points to a variety of interesting empirical questions that might enrich existing psychological theories and advance our understanding of behavior. For instance, do perceptions of the sacredness of life help account for the well-documented effects of priming mortality salience on subsequent behaviors that have been generated from Terror Management Theory (Soenke, Landau, and Greenberg 2013)? Do spiritual forms of meaning-making, those that focus on perceptions of the sacred as a source of meaning in life, play a distinctive role in efforts to comprehend trauma and suffering (Park et al. 2017). Do exclusively non-theistic forms of sanctification hold the same functional implications for human behavior as theistic sanctification, or does non-theistic sanctification become merely 'vestigial' when the perception of the sacred is disconnected from a divine core? On the other hand, do cognitions and perceptions that center exclusively around the divine core and that fail ripple out to a wider ring of life concerns lead to more constricted personal and social experiences and expressions? In this vein, commenting on religious experience, Huston Smith wrote (1976/1992): 'We must distinguish between individuals who experience flashes of insight and others who stabilize these flashes and turn them into abiding light' (113). More generally, is the capacity to perceive sacredness in life associated with attributes of well-being, such as wisdom and wholeness (Pargament, Wong, and Exline 2016; Walsh 2015)? Finally, can we identify other salient sacred qualities? Which of these qualities might be more generalizable across religious traditions and cultures and what might

be more culture specific (Anttonen 2000)? Thinking of sacred qualities as 'prototypes' (Oman 2013a) underscores the value of these kinds of comparative studies. Qualitative methodologies (e.g., ethnography, case studies, narrative research, grounded theory, content analysis of scripture, and biographies) could provide an important supplement to quantitative research on sacred qualities (Davis et al. 2016).

Even though, our focus here has been on psychological contributions to the study of the sacred, our approach has not been a narrow one. We have drawn on theorists and researchers from not only psychology, but also sociology, anthropology, theology, and religious studies. This seems entirely appropriate. The study of the sacred is not the exclusive domain of any institution or academic discipline. Each has something to offer an understanding of this richly complex topic. Further progress will likely rest on a willingness to move beyond our own disciplinary silos toward greater interdisciplinary sharing and collaboration in studies of the sacred.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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