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Finding and Articulating Meaning in Secular Experience

In discussing “secular experience” alongside “religious experience,” we risk reconfirming old dichotomies not suited to a pluralistic context if we don’t seek to understand the substantive content of “secular experience.” While we can single out experiences (plural) that people view as disturbing, puzzling, or out of the ordinary, this leaves out the everyday experience of nonreligious people. If we want to broaden our scope to include lived nonreligious experience, we are back to the definitional issues that plague scholars of religion and presumably religious educators as well. To expand our approach, we not only have to ask what we mean by religion, but also how we can express what we mean in generic terms that will allow us to consider the analogues for those who view themselves as secular, nonreligious, and/or nonspiritual. A meaning systems framework allows us to explore experience and experiences in relation to both religious and nonreligious worldviews and ways of life. Applied to “religious education“ in pluralistic contexts, it has the potential to help both religious and nonreligious students to articulate, discuss, reflect, critique, compare, and develop their worldview and at the same time, reflect on what it is like to live life as they do, and what, in their view, makes life meaningful.

1 Introduction

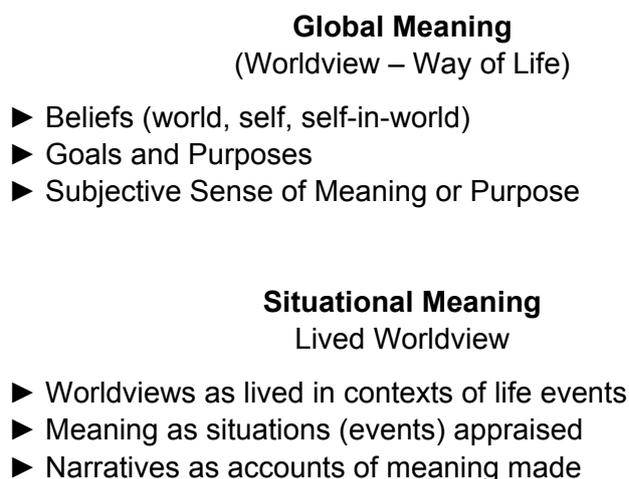
Religious educators who teach in pluralistic contexts are faced with many students who have limited contact “with religious communities and do not perceive their everyday experience as having a religious dimension (Streib & Gennerich 2011; Ziebertz, Kay & Riegel 2009).“ In light of this diversity, how might we think about “religious experience” with students for whom the concept has no meaning? Is there some analog to “religious experience” among those who view themselves as secular?

To get at this, we need to first consider what we mean by “religious experience.“ We can focus on distinctive or unusual experiences (plural) that people con-

sider religious or spiritual or we can focus on the more everyday experience of religious people that we may refer to as “lived religion” or “everyday spirituality.” Although some nonreligious students have unusual experiences and may benefit from discussions of such experiences in a nonclinical context, the burgeoning academic interest in studying those who view themselves as nonreligious, nonspiritual, or simply secular suggests the need for a broader conceptual approach. If the underlying problem is that religious educators confront students with issues, such as “religion” and “religious experience,” which for them have no meaning, we need to start with an approach that includes the way they look at the world.

We face a problem, however. Oftentimes, “secular experience” is simply viewed as the absence of “religious experience” as if secular experience were simply a negation of religion without any content of its own. A focus on “nonreligion” and “secularity” (Lee 2012) helpfully expands our focus beyond atheism or “non-belief,” but both terms are still defined in opposition to religion. If we do not want to simply replicate the traditional “religious/secular” binary, we need an overarching third term that encompasses both. To expand our approach, we not only have to ask what we mean by religion or religiousness, but also how we can express what we mean in generic terms that will allow us to consider the analogues for those who view themselves as secular, nonreligious, and/or nonspiritual. Here I want to suggest that we can elaborate the meaning systems framework, which was developed by psychologists to study stress and coping, to explore experience and experiences in relation to both religious and nonreligious worldviews and ways of life.

Fig. 1: The Meaning System Framework



Legend: adapted from Park and Folkman 1997; Park 2010.

2 What is a Meaning Systems Framework?

The meaning systems (MS) literature is premised on distinction between global meaning systems (GMS) and situational meanings (SM). Researchers characterize a GMS in terms of beliefs (world, self, self-in-world), goals, and subjective sense of meaning or purpose (Park & Folkman 1997; Park 2010). Religion and spirituality are explicitly understood as a major source of global meaning (Park 2005, 2013; Paloutzian 2005; 2017; Paloutzian et al. 2013). We can elaborate the two key elements of the MS framework from a more humanistic or anthropological perspective by thinking of GMS as worldviews or ways of life and SM more generally as lived worldviews or lived experience (Fig. 1).

GMS as Worldviews: Kant is credited with suggesting the concept of a “worldview,” which he and other philosophers developed as a means of relativizing or generalizing or relativizing religious outlooks (Naugle 2002), which is more or less what we are trying to do here. The interdisciplinary “Worldviews-Research Group“ led by Apostel and van der Veken explicitly characterized worldviews as offering answers to six fundamental philosophical questions (Vidal 2008, 4), which I will simply refer to as Big Questions [BQs] (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. The Big Worldview Questions

Question	Philosophical Discipline
- What is? What is the totality – the world – in which we live and to which we relate?	- Ontology (model of reality as a whole)
- Where did or does it (reality as we know it) come from?	- Cosmology (theory of origins)
- How do we know this?	- Epistemology (theory of knowledge)
- What is good and what is evil?	- Axiology (theory of values)
- Where are (or should) we be going?	- Prediction (model of the future)
- How should we act? How do we get to our goal?	- Praxeology (theory of action)

Legend: adapted with modifications from Vidal 2008.

Religions clearly provide worldviews. Indeed, variations on these big questions (BQs) have been used to structure world religions textbooks (Prothero 2010; Brodd et al. 2016; Kripal 2014) and textbooks in the history and philosophy of science (DeWitt 2010), where they provide a framework for comparison. In *Comparing Religions*, Jeffrey Kripal (2014, 105-106), highlights five ultimate concerns: What is this world? Where do we come from? Where do we go after we die? Who are we? How do we end up here and why? In *God is Not One* (2010, 23), Stephen Prothero suggests: Where are we going? How are we to live? Does God exist?

Does evil exist? Do we exist? What now? What next? What are we to become? In *Invitation to World Religions* (2016), Jeffrey Brodd and collaborators use three big questions to analyze each religion: What is ultimate reality? How should we live in this world? What is our ultimate purpose?

Within religious studies, some have advocated studying religions as worldviews (Smart 2000; Juergensmeyer 2010) and others a shift from studying religions to studying worldviews more generally (Anbeek, Alma, & Meijer, in press; Droogers 2014). Not only has the concept of “worldviews” generated an extensive academic discussion in philosophy and the social sciences since proposed by Kant (Naugle 2002), it is readily recognizable and in widespread popular use. Although spirituality is not specifically mentioned, we can easily surface it, if we think of it, as a search for the sacred (Pargament 1999, 12). As such, it is a form of goal directed action and searching is the path to the goal. It is, thus, one response to the big question of how we should act.¹

To pull this together we can organize the BQs that we have been drawing from philosophers and world religions textbooks and connect them with the MS framework. Here is one way to do it (see Fig. 3):

Fig. 3. Integrating Philosophical and Religious Questions

What is ultimate reality?

- REALITY (ontology): What is the deepest nature of things (ultimate reality)? Is there something eternal and unchanging? If so, what?
- ORIGINS (cosmology) – Where did it (reality – the world – as we know it) come from? How did we get here?
- KNOW (epistemology) – How do we know this?

What is our highest goal? What is our ultimate purpose? How should we live in this world?

- HUMAN CONDITION (anthropology): What is the situation in which we find ourselves? What is our nature?
- GOAL (prediction / axiology): Where are (or should) we be going?
- PATHS (praxeology) – How do we get there?

Legend: Brodd’s questions are in bold. The philosopher’s questions are in caps.

We can locate spirituality under praxeology. Spirituality supplies the PATHS that lead to GOALS. Under PATHS, we can consider two key issues related to spirituality. Practice: What does it mean to follow the path? How do we reach the goal?

1 Ironically, Pargament (1999, 11) defines spirituality as a search for “the sacred” in order distinguish it from paths that (merely) entail a search for “meaning, community, or self” and, thus, to distinguish the psychologist of religion’s object of study from that of other sub-specialties. A focus on worldviews allows researchers to get out of the business of defining “the sacred” and focus on how those we are studying characterize their actions and the paths they are following

Authenticity: How do we ensure that we stay on the path? What resources do we have to guide us?

Next we can integrate the BQs into the Global Meaning System in the MS framework. “What is ultimate reality?” elaborates the GMS beliefs regarding world, self, and self-in-world. The BQs related to goals, ultimate purpose, and how we should live in this world elaborate on the GMS goals and purposes. To get a sense of how this could work in practice, we can look at how someone who explicitly identifies as Christian, Hindu, or Humanist might answer some of these questions (see Fig 4).

Fig. 4. Christian, Hindu, and Humanist Answers to the BQs

How did we get there?

- God created us
- We are reborn (reincarnated)
- We evolved

How do we know?

- The Bible
- Vedas, Upanishads
- Darwin

What is the situation in which we find ourselves?

- We are sinful and in need of salvation to gain eternal life.
 - We are caught in the cycle of death and rebirth (samsara) and in need of liberation (moksha) to escape
 - We are social animals with one life and need to make the most of it
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In working with these worldviews, it is important to recognize that global meaning systems are not necessarily explicit and well developed. As the MS literature makes clear, a global meaning system can be implicit or explicit, taken for granted or reflected upon, and surfaced on a need-to-know basis, through interaction, formal dialogue, or actively cultivated. If we think of implicit worldviews as ways of life, it is clear that “way of life” is the larger, more encompassing concept. All humans have a way of life with many taken-for-granted beliefs and ways of doing things, but not all have an explicit worldview.

In contexts where growing numbers say they have “no religion,” people may be more aware of what they have rejected than with the meaning system implicit in the way of life they are living. Researchers are just starting to focus on what it means in a positive sense to live a secular life (Zuckerman, Lee). Because there are few contexts that encourage secular people to explicitly articulate and reflect on their worldview, we should not be surprised if they are less used to doing so.

Situational Meaning: This brings us to the other side of the MS model: Situational Meaning. In the MS model, situational meaning points to the constant process of appraising situations in light of our global meaning system. We can enrich

our sense of situational meaning by recognizing that everyday life is a series of situations or events, most of which people experience as quite ordinary and unremarkable within the context of their overarching worldview or way of life. These ordinary, unremarkable events are appraised, but because they are expected and predictable, the appraisals take place unreflectively and mostly unconsciously. Some of these more unusual situations and may lead to stressful situations the MS framework was initially designed to model. Because the MS researchers have used the meaning system framework primarily to study coping in situations of trauma, loss, and bereavement, they have focused on “situations” where discrepancies between global and situational meanings are likely to emerge.

Although the MS literature has focused on “situations” that stand out because they are traumatic, we can easily broaden our view to conceive of “situations” as the generic context in which everyday or lived meaning is made. We can enrich our sense of situational meaning by incorporating everything we associate with “lived religion” or “lived spirituality,” e.g., symbols, special objects, social groups, everyday practices, more formalized ritual practice and ceremonial rites, and the observance of moral and ethical codes of behavior. The situations or events thus considered could range from the ordinary to the extra-ordinary, the traumatic to the ecstatic, or the mundane to the highly significant.

The beauty of building on this model is that it is designed to accommodate everyone. If people explicitly embrace and identify with a worldview, they would presumably have easy access to it. If it is implicit (and some aspects would be for everyone), it is likely largely coextensive with their way of life and, thus, less easily accessed. Those who embrace a particular worldview will nonetheless have a greater or lesser awareness of its teachings. The degree to which it is shared will likely have some relation with the social relations and practices with which it is associated in everyday life. Lived meaning, thus, could be played out in various overlapping contexts:

- a dedicated social grouping with formalized stories, practices, and paths of development;
- a family; a workplace; a sports arena; or an institution, such as a hospital, a school, or a court, each with its own (potentially) competing GMS and normative practices;
- a loose network or very attenuated or intermittent set of social relations with an eclectic mix of occasional practices.

3 A Dynamic Interaction

In characterizing situations more richly, however, humanists should not lose sight of the MS researchers’ interest in dynamic processes, e.g., the role of GMS in the appraisal of situations or events, the interactions between GMS and SM in those

contexts, and the way that meaning is discovered and transformed in relation to situations or events. Based on our deeper immersion in the particulars of religious and nonreligious contexts – whether historically or ethnographically – we can seek to identify the factors that make a difference in these dynamics across worldviews and cultural contexts. This takes us to the heart of our topic:

Experience in a MS Framework: Humanist philosopher Richard Norman makes the very important point that meaning in life is not simply about beliefs, but more fundamentally about experience. “[T]his is demonstrated,” he notes, “by the fact that, even for those who have religious beliefs which might seem to sustain them, life can come to seem meaningless despite the beliefs” (Norman 2015, 336). In a sense, it is just this sort of failure, particularly in the context of trauma, that the MS framework was developed to study. Moreover, the MS framework implicitly recognizes that a GMS is not simply constituted by beliefs, but also by goals and a subjective sense of meaning or purpose. Within both the MS and worldview literature (Paloutzian & Mukai 2017; Vidal 2008), there are those that would push this point farther, claiming that all organisms – not just humans – require a GMS, rudimentary as it might be from a human perspective, in order to function. If we view meaning systems this broadly, it allows us to think about them within an evolutionary framework and ask (1) why we make meaning and (2) what evolved capacities lie at the heart of the meaning making process.

I would suggest that, from an evolutionary perspective, meaning making is bound up with goal directed action. When we compare actions of humans with other animals, we may think of our own actions in terms of our conscious goals and those of other animals in terms of mere instincts. If we think about it, however, it’s obvious that we perform many actions without consciously thinking about our goals. These more automatic actions are still goal directed. So, for example, we eat because we are hungry and, more globally, because we want to survive. Our goal of surviving is present, whether or not we think about it when we eat. We can infer an organism’s implicit purpose from its goal directed actions. We can refer to the meaning of its actions in light of this implicit purpose without suggesting that the organism feels a sense of purpose or meaning apart from the action itself. The organism is doing; it probably does not have the ability to think about what it is doing, but its actions are based on a certain degree of evolved fit between it and its environment that allows it to respond successfully and purposefully to a wide range of events.

Our conscious meaning making abilities rest on our human ability to reflect on why we do what we do. But reflection of this sort is more the exception than the rule. When we have a sense of purpose rooted in goal directed action, we generally experience life as meaningful without reflecting on the fact or trying to express why we feel it to be so. It’s when this sense of purpose or direction crumbles – when we feel uncertain, lose our sense of direction, or feel there is no point in going on – that life feels meaningless. This sense of confusion, pointlessness, or lack

of purpose is a feeling not a thought or belief. Conscious, reflective meaning making – the search for meaning – is typically a response to this feeling.

Norman suggests that for humanists the fundamental question is not “what is the meaning of life,” but “what makes life meaningful?” But I think that the question of what makes life meaningful is the foundational question for everyone. From an evolutionary perspective, it looks like the ground, so to speak, upon which meaning systems are built.

Norman identifies four aspects of everyday life that make our lives meaningful. We can think about them in relation to other animals as well as ourselves:

- “Being connected to the natural world and other living things.” Other animal species are most certainly connected to the natural world and other living things.
- “Being rooted in a human community with an ongoing history in which we share.” Other social species are definitely rooted in communities with histories in which they (unknowingly) share.
- “Our more intimate emotional relationship and attachments.” Most mammals have intimate emotional relationships and attachments with their offspring; some species, such as wolves and elephants, maintain family ties throughout their lives.
- “Being at home in a universe which dwarfs our mundane concerns.” In so far as humans are the only species that actively worries about the meaning of life, we may have this one to ourselves.

We can expect that, generally speaking, the disruption of connections to the natural world, to the social group, and of emotional relationships and attachments will lead to distress not only in humans, but also in many other animals. If this were the case, it would lead us to predict:

- 1) That people who are connected to others will generally feel a sense of meaning and purpose regardless of their GMS. That when those ties are disrupted by natural disasters, war, or death, this baseline experience of meaningfulness is likely to be challenged.
- 2) That an explicit GMS would build on these processes to create explicit systems that allow individuals to feel at home in a universe that dwarfs their individual concerns.
- 3) That these types of connection are separable, such that disruption of one does not necessarily mean disruption of the others and intact connections could compensate for disruptions in other areas.
- 4) Experiences that give rise to a sense of being at home in a universe that dwarfs our mundane concerns would be of value to people whether they interpret them in religious or spiritual terms or not. (See Coleman et al. 2013 on horizontal transcendence for research on such experiences.)

4 Application

Based on these predictions, we can generate a series of questions that we might ask students regarding their experience:

- GMS (Worldview-Sense of Meaning) – Do you have answers to the BQs? If so, how do you answer them? Do you consider your answers religious, spiritual, or neither? If you don't think much about the BQs, how would you describe your way of life? What is most important to you? Do you have a general sense of meaning or purpose in life? If so, what how would you describe it? If not, is this something that troubles you? If so, when has it been an issue?
- Lived experience – What is it like for you to hold this worldview or more generally live life as you do? When, if at all, does it come to mind? Why? Are there times when you consciously draw upon it? If so, when?
- Experiences – What experiences have you had that stood out for you in some way? Why did they stand out?² Were the experiences linked to particular situations or practices or did they arise seemingly spontaneously? How did you understand the experience? If it's meaning wasn't immediately obvious, did you later figure it out? If so, how?

In the context of “religious education“ in pluralistic contexts, these questions have the potential to help both religious and nonreligious students to articulate, discuss, reflect, critique, compare, and develop their worldview and at the same time, reflect on what it is like to live life as they do (that is, on their everyday experience) and on the experiences that, in their view, can make life meaningful.

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2 I'm assuming they could be significant/profound, puzzling, anomalous, frightening, traumatic, etc. Coleman et al. (2013) propose “horizontal transcendence” as a way to characterize experiences that people view as profoundly meaningful and at the same time neither religious nor spiritual

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