

Christian Meaning Making through Suffering

White Paper

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Though always unwelcome, suffering sometimes yields positive outcomes. Psychologists have sought to understand why some report growth or positive transformation and some do not. Meaning making has risen to prominence as a critical process by which those who experience suffering achieve positive results. When empirically testing meaning-making processes during and subsequent to difficult life circumstances, psychologists often use religion as the means for operationalizing global beliefs, since religions comprise comprehensive meaning-making frameworks.² Very little has been done, however, to consider the role of the specific content of religions in meaning-making from suffering. The purpose of this whitepaper is to construct an interface between empirical research on suffering in the psychology of religion and Christian theology.³

Psychologist Crystal Park developed a model to synthesize the empirical findings on growth and positive outcomes in the process of suffering.⁴ In this whitepaper, we extend and elaborate Park's meaning-making model using Christian-specific resources. Following a brief overview of Park's theory, we build out each of the components of her model using Christian theological concepts. Our purpose is to illustrate Christian specific religious constructs for shaping meaning in suffering, since comprehensiveness would go far beyond the scope of this

¹ Our work was funded by grant 61467 from the John Templeton Foundation to M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall and Crystal L. Park, co-PIs.

² Ralph W. Hood, Peter C. Hill, and W. Paul Williamson, *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005). Taylor Newton and Daniel N. McIntosh, "Unique Contributions of Religion to Meaning," in *The Experience of Meaning in Life: Classical Perspectives, Emerging Themes, and Controversies*, eds. Joshua A. Hicks and Clay Routledge (New York: Springer, 2013), 257-270.

³ A shorter version of a similar project can be found in: Jason McMartin, Eric J. Silverman, M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Jamie Aten, and Laura Shannonhouse. "Christian Meaning Making through Suffering in Theology and Psychology of Religion." *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, no. 1 (2020): 120-135.

⁴ Crystal L. Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Events," *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 2 (2010): 257-301.

whitepaper. In the final section, we provide future research trajectories and questions for the psychological model on the basis of theological reasoning.

Religion and the Meaning-Making Process

Park's model begins with the notion of global meaning, which consists of core beliefs, goals, and subjective feelings.⁵ Global beliefs include core schemas and cognitive frameworks, which people use to interpret life events.⁶ It includes beliefs about the nature of the world such as justice, controllability, predictability, and the self. It is one's worldview that has developed over the course of one's lifespan. People interpret their experiences by means of the orienting set of beliefs from their global meaning structure. Global meaning also includes goals – the motives and desires a person holds. According to Park, global meaning also includes a subjective sense of purpose.

In the second part of the model, specific life events are interpreted in relation to one's global meaning system. Stressful life events initiate a set of processes that yield temporary meaning specific to the suffering being experienced. This is known as situational meaning.⁷ If one's initial appraisal of the stressful life event is congruent with one's global belief system, then

⁵ Freya Dittman-Kohli and Gerben J. Westerhof, "The Personal Meaning System in a Life-Span Perspective," in *Exploring Existential Meaning: Optimizing Human Development Across the Life Span*, eds. Gary T. Reker and Kerry Chamberlain (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 1999): 107–122.; Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature"; Gary T. Reker and Paul T. P. Wong, "Aging as an Individual Process: Toward a Theory of Personal Meaning," in *Emergent Theories of Aging*, eds. James E. Birren and Vern L. Bengtson (New York, NY: Springer, 1988): pp. 214–246.

⁶ Ronnie Janoff-Bulman and Cynthia McPherson Frantz, "The Impact of Trauma on Meaning: From Meaningless World to Meaningful Life," in *The Transformation of Meaning in Psychological Therapies: Integrating Theory and Practice*, eds. Mick J. Power and Chris R. Brewin (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1997): 91–106. Walter Mischel and Carolyn C. Morf, "The Self as a Psycho-Social Dynamic Processing System: A Meta-Perspective on a Century of the Self in Psychology," in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, eds. Mark R. Leary and June P. Tangney (New York: Guilford, 2003): 15–43.

⁷ Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Camille B. Wortman and Roxane Cohen Silver, "The Myths of Coping with Loss Revisited," in *Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequences, Coping, and Care*, eds. Margaret S. Stroebe, Robert O. Hansson, Henk Schut, and Wolfgang Stroebe (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001): 405–429.

no further processing need take place. If this appraisal or interpretation of the suffering is discrepant from global meaning, then distress is experienced. The greater the discrepancy, the greater the resulting distress over the meaning-gulf that has opened.⁸ The function of the meaning making process is to reduce the discrepancy between global and situational meaning and restore a view of the world as meaningful, one's suffering as understandable, and one's own life as worthwhile. The process employs varying resources; we will focus on beliefs, practices, and virtues. Park's model suggests that successful resolution results, not only in a reduction of the discrepancy between global and situational meanings, but also in perceived or real physical and mental health gains. The outcomes of the process, then, are meanings made.

A Christian Meaning-Making Model

In this section, we work through the four main facets of Park's psychological model of meaning-making (i.e. Christian global and situational meaning, Christian meaning making processes, and Christian meaning made). For each facet of the model, we describe a few relevant Christian theological concepts to build an interface between Park's psychological theory and Christian-specific resources of meaning making in the midst of suffering.

Christian Global Meaning

We begin with a brief overview of the Christian global beliefs that are most relevant to suffering. Our goal is to present classic 'orthodox' Christianity in her most ecumenical form, rather than merely in terms of a particular sect. Therefore, we will be assuming "Christian" here represents those classic expressions of the Faith which affirm the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381). This ancient credal foundation allows us to draw upon and reflect the breadth of the Church, from Eastern Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism, as well as including the diversity

⁸ Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature."

found within Protestantism. Theology is prescriptive, commending for belief affirmations that are believed to be true and well-grounded. As a result, it makes distinctions among beliefs such as orthodox/unorthodox, creedal/non-creedal, biblical/non-biblical, etc. It regularly discriminates among beliefs that are thought to fit within the framework of “Christian” and those that are not. No one has all and only true thoughts about God. Descriptively, then, religious people believe many things that do not align with the prescriptive pronouncements of theologians. Most of what follows is intended as broadly prescriptive and consensual (dangerous though that might be). In a few places, we will signal deviations, which nonetheless describe beliefs that those who align with the Christian banner have espoused concerning suffering.

Often the Christian belief system is structured as a narrative with four main acts describing God’s working in the world: creation, fall, redemption, and glorification.⁹ God is the primary agent in this narrative; thus, the Christian worldview has as its central focus the character and nature of God. Humans and other spiritual beings are secondary agents within this four-fold narrative. After surveying the nature of the actors, we provide an overview of the four acts of the narrative as these relate to suffering.

God is a personal and transcendent being who has acted (creation and redemption) and spoken (sacred writing) in history, and who has perfect attributes in relation to power and authority (omnipotence), time (eternality), and knowledge (omniscience). God exhibits perfect virtue; humans in the image of God are meant to reflect these characteristics (e.g., holiness,

⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Series Eds.) A. C. Coxe (Ed.). *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, The Apostolic fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1885/1994).

justice, goodness, loving kindness, graciousness, truthfulness, and faithfulness).¹⁰ The unfolding historical narrative progressively reveals the nature and character of God.

God granted humankind personal agency in order to contribute as actors in the narrative. As secondary actors within the grand narrative of history, humans are dependent upon God to establish their significance and to provide knowledge of their significance. Unlike the entirety of the creation (with the possible exception of the angels), humans were granted the capacity for free appropriation of the meaning and significance given to them by God.

Several biblical texts explain the limited perspective and knowledge that humans have of the broader contours of the narrative in which they find themselves. The prologue to the book of Job, for instance, explains the causes of Job's suffering of which he is unaware. Within the narrative of the book, Job does not discover the source of his affliction, and God's communication with him at the end of the book emphasizes Job's limited perspective and knowledge in contrast to God's. Human limitations contrast with God's exhaustive knowledge (omniscience) with respect to past, present, and future. Humans are meant to reflect God as knowers, but to do so in a limited manner. Although Christian scripture portrays God as having comprehensive knowledge of the world and its events, including suffering, humans are not always or regularly given insight into the meaning of specific instances of suffering.

Large portions of scripture convey a divine perspective on the meaning of suffering. Prior to the exile, at the end of the Old Testament era, God sends prophets who explain that the destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile are God's punishment for waywardness from the covenant. Similarly, post-exilic authors reflect on the events and interpret their meaning by

¹⁰ David S. Dockery, "Introduction," in *Shaping a Christian Worldview: The Foundations of Christian Higher Education*, eds. David S. Dockery and Gregory A. Thornbury (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002): 1-15.

means of this divinely provided one. For example, the Chronicler interprets the exile as a needed Sabbath rest for the land (II Chronicles 36:21). Likewise, in the New Testament, the suffering of Jesus Christ is interpreted as being the means for salvation and healing of humankind.

Thus, the Bible contains two contrasting modes: humans are limited in knowledge, but are sometimes given insight into the meaning of specific instances of suffering.¹¹ Both modes share the perspective that God is superior in knowledge to human beings. Although some insight into evil and suffering is granted to human beings, some is withheld. Some instances of suffering are given with an interpretation. Others are not. Therefore, revelation is central to the Christian interpretation of evil and suffering. What God has chosen to reveal provides the framework for potential interpretation of what God has not revealed.

The Christian worldview narrative includes personal agents other than God and humans: angels and demons. In a prominent interpretation, Job's calamities come from the hand of the Satan, the chief of fallen angels (Job 1:13-2:8). These agents also play a role in the narrative. Following the pattern outlined above, some instances of evil are revealed to be the result of demonic activity, while others are not. Overall, then, the Christian narrative encourages a balanced, non-reductive approach to suffering and evil. Suffering comes from multiple causes and has multiple explanations.

From a prescriptive theological point of view, deficient theologies of suffering are often reductionistic. They may take one aspect or explanation of suffering and make it absolute and employ it as a complete account of suffering. For example, some Christians may attribute the majority or the entirety of suffering and evil to malignant spiritual forces. This distortion would

¹¹ Neither of these modes precludes general human knowledge concerning suffering and its causes, nor non-revealed insight into specific causes of suffering.

accordingly diminish the role of human agency in instances of suffering and propose spiritual deliverance and the primary means of healing.

Deficient theologies of suffering may also place certain limitations within the global meaning framework in order to reduce the potential conflict between global beliefs and situational meanings. Open theists, for example, contend that God does not know the outcome of future free decisions of human agents. Instances of evil and suffering arising from human causes are in a significant sense outside of God's control. (Another example of circumscriptions within the global framework as espoused by process theists will be discussed below.)

Creation

Turning to the first act of the four-fold narrative: God created everything. Though humans do not have the incommunicable attributes of God, they were created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-28),¹² and thus have the limited potential to develop virtuous characteristics such as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

The Christian worldview affirms that the created world is radically contingent. None of this had to be here. The explanation for why anything exists at all rests solely with divine agency. God was not compelled to make the world, being already complete within the Trinity. Instead, God created as a fitting exercise of creativity and love. Jonathan Edwards suggests God made God's own self the purpose in creating the world.¹³ The telos of the created universe is God himself. This purpose does not compete with the well-being of creatures. Rather, the design of humans and the entirety of creation is grounded in teleological completion in God. The goods

¹² Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 355-357.

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Made the World*, <http://www.ccel.org/e/edwards/works1.iv.html>.

of humanity, then, are subordinate to the goods of God. Therefore, any goods that result from suffering should also be subordinate to the goods of God, as this is built into the created order.

God ordered the world and its goods in a state of shalom: a harmonious wholeness reflective of, and dependent on, God's own well-being. Although the biblical narrative provides a tantalizingly brief image of this pristine condition prior to a devastating disruption of this interconnected web of harmonious relationships, the created order is repeatedly affirmed as being good throughout scripture.

Fall

Christianity also teaches that the fall into sin – the deliberate turning away from God – has damaged, but not obliterated the shalom of creation. Sin prevents humans from living in a healthy relationship with God, others, nature, and themselves. This rebellious disruption of the idyllic narrative starting point resulted from human freedom. God did not introduce evil into the world he created and is thus not the author of suffering. Having been thwarted by sin, freedom results in variable connections between objective standards of goodness, human desires, and outcomes of human agency. Many Christians have contended that evil is parasitic on goodness and cannot have independent existence;¹⁴ it is alien to the structure of creation. Evil and suffering are nevertheless real and not illusory.

While creation affirms God's power, the fall into sin may be thought to undermine it. However, this is not the case. Classic orthodox expressions of Christianity affirm God's omnipotence, which is the attribute of having infinite power, enabling God to do anything that can be done. As a result of divine omnipotence, there is an important sense in which everything that occurs is willed or at least allowed by God. Therefore, all suffering on earth can be

¹⁴ Paul L. Gavrilyuk, "An Overview of Patristic Theodicies," in *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought*, ed. N.V. Harrison and D. G. Hunter (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 1-6.

experienced as God having chosen to allow such suffering and as having good reasons for allowing that suffering. That being said, many Christians believe that there are things that cannot be accomplished by omnipotence, such as the instantiation of contradictions. For example, God can't create a square that is also a circle or cause two plus two to equal five. Most relevant to the issue of suffering is that God cannot give humans genuine free will and then force them to use that free will only for good purposes.

Process theologians generally restrict God's omnipotence further. (They also accordingly restrict God's omniscience in ways similar to open theism discussed above.) God does not or cannot exercise efficient causation to bring about specified outcomes in the world. Instead, God lures the world and offers possible futures for it.

Before we discuss suffering directly, a brief word on distinguishing between creaturely finitude and sin may prove useful. This is especially relevant since those who suffer can be tempted to hate their bodies, or can begin to think of the material world in wholly negative ways.

Distinguishing Finitude from Evil

Christians affirm that we live in a fallen world. Sin is often understood to have affected everything from our heads to our hearts, from our body chemistry to socio-political dynamics. Even given this reality, it can be too easy to reduce all our problems to 'sin,' when in fact, part of what humans keep running up against is simply the challenge of creaturely limits. Consequently, care must be taken to distinguish between creaturely finitude (a good) and sin (a problem).

The Creator—creature distinction has always been foundational to classic orthodox Christianity. Humans are not God. Admitting this apparently obvious observation can nevertheless create more questions than answers, yet Christians believe human limits (e.g., in reference to time, space, knowledge, power) are an appropriate creaturely good rather than evil.

While the experience of human death and suffering is normally deemed a result of the fall (e.g., Gen. 2: 17; 3: 16-19; Rom. 6:23), simply facing creaturely limits is not. Therefore, distinguishing between fitting limits and painful suffering will be important. Here we must keep in mind the ontological difference between God and humans. For example, while God knows everything (omniscient), humans only ever have limited information and a particular perspective, so admitting ‘I don’t know’ is a healthy part of the human experience. While God has infinite power (omnipotent) that he employs in line with his character, humans never escape their creaturely limits of strength, ingenuity, and creativity. While God is everywhere (omnipresent), humans are restricted by time and space; and yet, this doesn’t necessarily mean that God approves of everything that happens in his creation or by his creatures. For example, God consistently grows upset when the widow, orphan, and sojourner are neglected or mistreated. Divine sovereignty can only then rightly be understood in light of the entire Christian story (creation, fall, redemption, new creation). The great promise is not that there is no suffering in our present fallen world, but that one day in the final renewal of creation tears, pain, and suffering will no longer abide, instead replaced with the original goods and joys of creaturely life lived in harmony with God and the rest of creation (Is. 35:10; 65:17-25; 2 Pet. 3:13).

One can, therefore, affirm divine knowledge, presence, and power without affirming that God delights in everything that happens in our present fallen world. This will become important to Christian conceptions of suffering, where believers often affirm what can seem paradoxical: God is sovereign while humans are responsible agents; humans are uniquely dignified as bearing God’s image even as they are also sinners under the shadow of the curse; God can find evil abhorrent even as he allows it. God can never cease to be God even as humans can never cease to be creatures. Therefore, when this holy and loving Lord engages his sinful creatures who

experience the realities of sin and suffering, his goal is not for them to cease to be human, but instead, to be liberated from the sin and suffering that has so tainted and tortured their creaturely experience. But in this way, the Christian hope is not about a ghostly future existence, but grounded in the original goods of the Creator Lord who has not abandoned what he has made but instead is working to make all things new through his Son and by his Spirit. Creaturely finitude is not what must be overcome, but rather sin and suffering is the problem. Such background can be crucial for Christians starting to make sense of their own suffering, whether they are thinking about their bodies, relationships, or faith.

Defining Suffering

Suffering is best understood in the context of an account of the good or flourishing for persons. Conflicting interpretations of suffering are possible. Either suffering is 1) the failure to gain a good (or possession of the opposite of the good) for persons, 2) The subjective perception of the sufferer--accurate or otherwise--that they lack a good, or 3) The combination of both 1) and 2): Both lacking a good accompanied by the subjective awareness of that lack. On 3) if the good constituting personal flourishing is pleasure, then suffering would be pain plus the agent's personal awareness of that pain. If the good is fulfilled desires, then suffering would be unfulfilled desires plus the awareness that they are unfulfilled. If the good is virtue, then suffering would be vice plus the awareness of one's own viciousness. If the good is union with God, then suffering would be distance from God plus an awareness of that distance. And so forth....

This foreshadows some potential benefits of meaning making, since many personal evils such as personal pain can be reinterpreted as part of (or necessary for) some larger good such as union with God or the development of virtue. In such cases, the objective physical pain may

remain, but the subjective suffering might be mitigated since reflection upon the pain can recontextualize it as something connected to some broader narrative of the good and not simply an evil or harm.

Suffering and the Threat of Meaninglessness

In contrast to negative experiences, that can be made meaningful and recontextualized as connected to a broader narrative of the good, meaningless suffering is the ongoing subjective experience of an evil or bad that the person does not connect to any greater meaning or good. When individual Christians use broader Christian narratives such as the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, or the broader fall and redemption of this world (through Christ's sacrifice) to make sense of their experiences, they can avoid meaninglessness and mitigate many aspects of suffering.

Redemption

God's loving response to the fall into sin is to make reconciliation possible through the exemplary life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus is now the center for Christian conceptions of suffering in this present world. Narratives and reflections on his significance transform how the Christian community understands life, death, and the suffering that is experienced on this side of glory. What God thinks of suffering must now, for Christians, be viewed through Christ first and foremost. Christ's love not only allows for redemption, that is, human reconciliation with God, but also serves as an impetus to love both God and others, which is central to a Christian understanding of goodness. When asked what is the greatest commandment, Jesus replied "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:30-31,

New Revised Standard Version). Sent by the Father and in the power of the Spirit, the Son of God entered into solidarity with us in the incarnation, and now Jesus the Messiah uniquely serves as the mediator between God and people, also serves as the model for what the image of God is; the Christian process of transformation (known as sanctification) is a journey to become more like Christ. Falling short through sin and human suffering are expected experiences in Christian global meaning, and viewed as opportunities to grow in the likeness of Christ. Further, becoming more Christlike, growing in unity with Christ, and glorifying Christ are more important goals than avoiding suffering.

Glorification

Although the end of the narrative has not yet arrived, Christian scripture provides a glimpse of this future state. The Christian story ends with the hope of glorification, in which Christ will come again, the sanctification process will result in conformity to Christlikeness, and resurrected believers will enjoy a new heaven and new earth that has been completely redeemed from the effects of sin. The world will be healed from its corruption during the reign of sin and evil; the original state of shalom will be restored. Moreover, the spiritual adversaries of human beings, Satan and his demons, will be destroyed and rendered unable to afflict human beings any longer. In glory there will be no more tears, or pain, or disrupted relationships (e.g., Rev. 21:4). And this eschatological vision helps us properly define suffering, for simply being a creature with limits is not suffering, but the hurt, the emotional distress, and the fractured self and/or community all are healed and made right. These glimpses of the end of the narrative provide hope for the present by showing that suffering and evil are not inherent to the world or to the

human condition and will one day be eradicated from human experience. Furthermore, in the Christian narrative there are close ties between suffering and the process of glorification.¹⁵

Christian Situational Meaning

In Park's model, situational meanings are the initial appraisal made of a stressful life event. Initial appraisal of an event may be implicit rather than explicit. Since global beliefs are worldviews, many situational appraisals will be sub-conscious or will challenge deeply held assumptions.

Christian beliefs regarding the situational meaning of painful life events include an affirmation that most or all causes of suffering are ultimately traceable to the fall into sin, including moral injuries, disease and death, and even natural catastrophes.¹⁶ The solution to suffering at a universal level is found in the person of Jesus, whose salvific work will achieve the end of all suffering at the time of his second coming. At the individual level, suffering, while negative in that it is a consequence of sin and the Fall, can be redeemed to accomplish God's loving purposes in the world, and to shape individual believers to become more like Jesus. Jesus is the savior who can sympathize with suffering because of his own experience of suffering; he is considered the unparalleled model for how to suffer (Hebrews 5:7-9).

Christian situational meanings of suffering differ from those of other religions. Unlike other religious views which aim to surmount suffering and leave it behind (e.g., Buddhism),¹⁷ Christian situational understandings of suffering prioritize growth as a means toward the

¹⁵ M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, "Suffering as Formation: The Hard Road to Glory," in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Formation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Diane Chandler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 69-88.

¹⁶ M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Richard Langer, and Jason McMartin, "The Role of Suffering in Human Flourishing: Contributions from Positive Psychology, Theology, and Philosophy," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 38 no. 2 (2010), 111-121.

¹⁷ Jens Schlieter, "Endure, Adapt, or Overcome? The Concept of "Suffering" in Buddhist Bioethics," in *Suffering and Bioethics*, eds. Ronald M. Green and Nathan J. Palpant (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 309-336.

redemption of suffering. For example, we find early Christian martyrs as well as the desert fathers and mothers who approached suffering as an occasion to reimagine the world, discovering God's life and love as greater than pain and difficulty. Suffering is understood as a pathway to greater conformity to Christ's image through the development of virtues and dependence on God. Unlike other religious beliefs that place suffering as central to reality (e.g., Buddhism),¹⁸ in Christianity love is at the center of the model, and suffering is demoted to a consequence of the fall. Other religious systems deny the reality of sources of suffering (e.g., Christian Science),¹⁹ but Christianity takes seriously the reality of suffering and gives weight to its defeat in the necessary death of Jesus.

Discrepancy between appraised situational meaning and global meaning may arise in several ways. It can arise at the level of beliefs or in discrepancy with goals or purposes. Theologian Todd Billings, in his theological reflection on his terminal cancer, noted that many expect a long life, especially in Western countries.²⁰ A cancer diagnosis, for example, challenges such a belief. For Billings, it also challenged his goals and subjective sense of purpose with respect to the raising of his young children. His plans for the future had centered around providing for his family for the long term; his cancer diagnosis challenged these expectations and formed a discrepancy.²¹ Many instances of suffering increase awareness of mortality. Yet, in the Christian perspective, the individual's narrative and its ending does not encompass the entirety of the story. As Billings puts it, "we enter as characters in the middle of the story, not as authors of the story who know all of the reasons God allowed the fall or this evil event. We may have

¹⁸ Schlieter, "Endure, Adapt, or Overcome?"

¹⁹ Crystal L. Park, "Religion as a Meaning-Making Framework in Coping with Life Stress," *Journal of Social Issues* 61 (2005): 707-729. doi: [10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00428.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00428.x)

²⁰ See also Benedict J. Groeschel, *Arise from Darkness: What to Do When Life Doesn't Make Sense* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 17-20.

²¹ J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer & Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), 4-12.

partial explanations – and those partial explanations have usefulness in certain contexts.”²²

Discrepancy can arise in my understanding of how my individual narrative fits within the larger gospel narrative.

Justice

An important aspect of the Christian worldview is the belief that the world is ultimately a just place. Every wrong will eventually be set right --at least in eternity-- and nothing that happens is truly random. This belief is based upon the implications of divine power controlling the world along with divine character. However, the possibility that negative events happen because we live in a fallen, broken world or because people (humans or demons) misuse free will for bad or foolish purposes count as non-random reasons for why suffering happens.

These three types of explanations mirror the distinction between natural and moral suffering. Natural suffering is conceptualized as suffering that occur because of the fallenness of the earthly natural world. In contrast, moral suffering results from the misuse of good, God-given free will, and might include our own personal misuse of free will, the misuse of free will by other humans, and on some interpretations of Christianity, even the demonic misuse of free will. In any case, the Christian belief in ultimate Divine justice entails that God will fix all injustice and unjust suffering experienced in this world during eternity. “[Some mortals] say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.”²³

Christian Meaning-Making Processes

When a stressor generates discrepancy between appraised meaning of the event and one’s global meaning system, a meaning-making process is initiated with the goal of ameliorating the

²² Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament*, 29-30.

²³ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

discrepancy. Successful resolution has been found to result in positive outcomes, such as character growth.²⁴

Psychological theorists have distinguished between assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the adjustment of situational beliefs to align better with global beliefs. Accommodation is the revision of global beliefs. Situational meaning that is too different from one's global beliefs is challenging to accommodate as it requires one to question what he or she knows,²⁵ and explore the basis of one's values and beliefs. When situational meaning does not comfortably fit with one's current schemas,²⁶ one can block out or refute life events that prove too strange. Psychologists dispute whether assimilation or accommodation is more common and more advantageous.²⁷ In other words, there are multiple routes toward resolution of discrepancy.

Given the vast array of potential meaning-making processes within the Christian tradition, we are not able to survey all of them here. These resources for suffering well can be categorized as beliefs, virtues, and practices. Some of these kinds of resources can be both employed in the meaning-making process as a state or activity and be outcomes of it as a trait (disposition, virtue, etc.). That is, in some instances an action/verb (e.g., acts of gratitude) are internally connected to a trait/noun (e.g., the virtue of gratefulness). As a result, there is a fair amount of potential overlap or connection between this section of the model (processes) and the next, which is outcomes. (Note that in Park's conceptualization of the model, all of these parts fall within situational meaning.) Other kinds of meaning-making processes are not connected to their outcomes in this way. For example, many of the formative practices are indirect. Fasting is

²⁴ E.g., Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature," 257-301.

²⁵ Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

²⁶ Piaget, J. (1954). *The construction of reality in the child*. New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc.

²⁷ Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature," 260.

a means toward an end and not an end in itself. We will provide a few illustrations of each of these categories, all of which will prove to be excellent material for further empirical investigation.

Some have been tempted to assume that theodical questions are primary for those who suffer and thus constitute the larger part of the meaning-making process in the midst of suffering. It is not clear that this generalization is warranted. In one qualitative study of Christian cancer sufferers, theodical questions were not prominent. Two thirds of participants did not report experiencing such struggles.²⁸ “Why” questions form one part, but perhaps not the most extensive part of the Christian meaning-making process. Instead, consideration of how to suffer well, can and should command a larger portion of our attention.²⁹

Christian global and situational religious beliefs provide the foundation for engaging in certain practices for the purpose of growing in the likeness of Christ. Humans are called to respond to the divine initiative; many practices are prescribed toward that end, while others may be beneficial for fulfilling human purpose for some but not for others. Though frequently spanning several facets of the Christian narrative, some practices may be especially connected with some phases in the divine narrative. Spiritual disciplines develop Christian virtues and enable religious adherents to experience the Christian worldview in a more personal and dynamic way. These practices are embodied ways of bringing the self into closer touch with the abstract values and theoretical Christian claims that aid in meaning making.³⁰

²⁸ M. Elizabeth L. Hall, Laura Shannonhouse, Jamie Aten, Jason McMartin, and Eric Silverman, “Theodicy or Not?: Spiritual Struggles of Evangelical Cancer Survivors,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 47 (forthcoming).

²⁹ Kelly M. Kopic, *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 17-26.

³⁰ E.g., Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989).

Some of these practices are common to many religions (e.g., gratitude). Others are also common across several religions, but may take specific forms within Christianity (e.g., the prayer of examen). Still other disciplines are unique to Christianity (e.g., holy communion). One recent handbook of Christian practices identified 62 spiritual disciplines that have been practiced by diverse Christian groups throughout the centuries.³¹ Some of these may be particularly relevant to meaning-making in suffering, such as petitionary prayer, contemplative prayer, meditation on Scripture, the practice of forgiveness, submission, and lament. These practices are embodied ways of bringing the self into closer touch with the abstract values and theoretical Christian claims that aid in meaning making.

Virtuous Actions

Grace and Gratitude

Gratitude is defined as “as a tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other’s benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains.”³² Psychological gratitude interventions have been found to lead people to recall deeply meaningful memories and identify the presence of meaning in their lives.³³ Since nothing compelled God to create the world, gratitude to God comprises a central human response to God’s gift of creation. St. Paul suggests that ingratitude constitutes an essential breach in relationship with God (Rom. 1:18-23). Thankfulness is broadly the pro-attitude and disposition towards recognizing the good

³¹ Adele A. Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005).

³² McCullough, M. E., Emmons, R. A., & Tsang, J. A. (2002), p. 112. The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 112–127. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.1.112>

³³ Wade, N. G., Hoyt, W. T., Kidwell, J. E. M., & Worthington, E. L., Jr. (2014). Efficacy of psychotherapeutic interventions to promote forgiveness: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 82, 154–170. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0035268>

one experiences in life, especially the unmerited good. The importance of acknowledging the unmerited favor surrounding our lives is an important contributor to meaning making.

The experience of divine grace and mercy are two aspects of this undeserved good.³⁴ Divine grace is the positive unwarranted good that all humans experience to varying degrees in life. In contrast, mercy is the undeserved withholding of negative consequences for wrongdoing and foolishness. Additionally, the goodness of existence itself, the act of divine love in creation and the sacrifice of Christ for the redemption of this world ensures that there is always an abundance of things for which to be thankful.

As a disposition, gratitude inclines one globally toward the reception of the world as a gift and not as an entitlement. Christianity assumes that God himself is the giver of all things, with the great gifts of God being the Son and Spirit: God gives *himself*. Divine generosity then animates the world and human creatures who are invited to respond and participate in this movement of divine grace.³⁵ Such an orientation has the potential to shift how losses are experienced, since my expectation regarding my possession of those things is different. When grateful, I acknowledge my insufficiency and dependence. I am not self-made, but rely on others for my well-being.³⁶ Gratitude can also be a facet of one's initial appraisal of event, perhaps even including events of suffering. Much care must be exercised here, but there appears to be room to be grateful for suffering itself (e.g., II Cor. 12:7-10; James 1:2-7).

³⁴ For more on Christian conceptions of grace and recent explorations from the perspective of Positive Psychology, see Robert A. Emmons, Justin L. Barrett, and Peter C. Hill, and Kelly M. Kopic, "Psychological and Theological Reflections on Grace and its Relevance for Science and Practice" in *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (American Psychological Association), 2017, Vol. 9, No. 3. 276-284.

³⁵ For more on the theme of grace/gift as framing the Christian narrative, see Kelly M. Kopic, *The God Who Gives: How the Trinity Shapes the Christian Story* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan).

³⁶ Mark R. McMinn, *The Science of Virtue: Why Positive Psychology Matters to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2017), 73-75.

Formative Practices

Engagement with Scripture: Reading, Meditation, Memorization, etc.

As Hastings notes, the Scriptures are full of human realism and unflinching perspectives on human suffering.³⁷ Engagement with the material from Scripture has the potential to enter the Christian meaning-making process in a variety of ways. Many of these have been considered already in this paper.

Scripture provides multiple patterns of engagement with suffering. Among these is lament, which will be considered below. Given the importance of Scripture to Christians, it provides comfort, but is also subject to misuse.

Prayer

The nature of the human person mirrors the structure of prayer. Thus prayer may be thought of as a uniquely human response that is deeply congruent with human nature. It instantiates the gift and task of being human. Prayer aligns our internal states with reality.³⁸ Prayer puts us into the relationship for which we were created and is the fulfillment of our nature. The “being with” component of prayer is essential to it, and can undergird a variety of different accounts of divine and human agency in prayer.

Prayer is a significant meaning-making practice on its own and in conjunction with a wide variety of other activities. Prayer enables us to engage with the doubt caused by suffering and the threat of death without succumbing to meaninglessness. We are not aware in a detailed manner of all that grounds meaning for us, but we trust in the one who assures us that such meaning is present. Faith trusts in the ultimate meaning without being able to see it. Nagel

³⁷ Hastings, 140.

³⁸ I don't mean by that to endorse the prayer-as-alignment view over and against prayer as moving the hand of God. This has been a subject of much debate.

contends that “there does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unsettling doubts could not arise.”³⁹ The biblical pattern provides much fodder for those who express their doubts to God through prayer. Nagel does say provocatively that “the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves.”⁴⁰ Though not what he had in mind, Nagel’s assertion suggests the problem arises from being sinfully out of sync with our true nature.

Lament

In practice, lament is prayer. But it also represents deep engagement with a prominent genre of Scripture. Sometimes considered a spiritual discipline, expressions of lament can assist the sufferer in reconstructing meaning after the disorienting effects of suffering.⁴¹ Biblically and experimentally framed, “laments rise to the heavens as a strange combination of complaint, grief, questions, confusion, desire for rescue, and expectation of divine faithfulness.”⁴² They are not uniform or easily categorized, but they do often show distress as one wrestles through the apparent disconnect between previous beliefs and current experience. Christian expressions of lament are often drawn from and shaped by biblical sources such as the Psalms and the book of Lamentations; the Gospels likewise record Jesus’ practice of it.

To the uninitiated, laments may appear as a denial of religion or a lack of faith. However, such honest expressions from the heart are often significant signs of deep religious belief and trust. Lament may therefore signal real discrepancy between previously assumed Global Meaning and the challenges a stressful situation now creates: fresh opportunities open up

³⁹ Nagel, “The Absurd,” 17.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, “Suffering in God’s Presence: The Role of Lament in Transformation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 9, no.2 (2016): 219-232.

⁴² *Embodied Hope*, 29.

to revisit earlier assumptions that previously shaped a person's underlying beliefs and goals. Sometimes lament may appear to encourage the people to revise their beliefs (e.g., they now believe they misunderstood what God was like) or to find fresh security in what was earlier affirmed (e.g., God's presence is discovered, not simply in the absence of pain, but even amid it). Here Elenore Stump's distinction between Dominican and Franciscan approaches to knowledge may prove useful.⁴³ Lament and similar practices can assist the sufferer to move from a "Dominican" understanding (analytic and helpful with distinctions) to "Franciscan" (evocative and driven by narrative). Suffering often highlights and brings out this kind of distinction about different ways of "knowing," and Christians have historically had space for both. Though different, both expressions can be appropriate and meaningful, but they function and serve different purposes.

Real lament often arises from personal pain and questions that one has with a personal God, rather than an abstract or distant deity. Jesus on the cross echoes the ancient psalm of lament (Ps. 22:1) when he cries out, "my God my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34). This is not a distant deity addressed here, but 'my God.' There is therefore a threatening sense of loss or betrayal that is heightened during these stressful situations. As Daniel J. Simundson, a Hebrew Bible scholar rightly observes,

The lament allows for honest interchange between humans and God, the freedom to admit even bad theology and hostile thoughts. The lament turns to God as the ultimate source of help and, in the typical lament form, ends with the assurance that God has heard and will save. The lament does not solve all of the sufferer's intellectual questions about the origin and meaning of the suffering, but does provide a structured way for the faithful to bring their suffering to God's attention and to cope with it.⁴⁴

⁴³ See Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), esp. ch. 3.

⁴⁴ Daniel J. Simundson, "Suffering," in *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman and Gary A. Herion (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 6:222.

Structurally, biblical lament as exemplified by a third of the Psalter is a stylized form of speech typically consisting of five elements: an address to God, complaints, request, expression of a motivation for God to act, and usually an expression of confidence in God.⁴⁵ This latter element, in particular, makes Christian lament unique in its unexpected turn toward God in trust. Lament provides an emotional process that allows for the creation of new meanings, organizing and facilitating the process of meaning-making in suffering. Lament encourages psychological movement from distress to praise, and from disorientation to new orientation. In line with Park's (2005) meaning-making model, lament begins in a place of tension with God and structures experience in order to move the sufferer to a place of intimacy, trust, and worship of God.

Identification with Christ's Suffering

Jesus's death is viewed not simply as a means of salvation for Christians, but it has also been viewed as an image or pattern to guide the believer's life. Biblically, the cross is spoken of both as the means of redemption and as the great example for Christians to follow. Taking up their cross and following Jesus becomes a form of life that is animated by 'other' focus rather than 'self' focus. How might such a perspective grow or diminish amid the believer's own suffering?

During times of suffering, this image has sometimes taken on specific power and meaning for Christians through the ages. Sometimes this comes through difficulties associated with persecution for the Faith, but at other times such solidarity and encouragement comes as believers find themselves identifying with Christ's physical sufferings because they are physically hurting themselves. Personal pain and suffering have sometimes been seen as an opportunity to enter "into the sufferings of Christ." Various Christian traditions therefore

⁴⁵ Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to lament with the Psalms* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012).

employ the discipline of meditating on the wounds of Christ to shape and reshape Christian perspectives on suffering. Sometimes believers kneel in a church before a cross with a crucified Savior on it. Others have used icons that can be employed in private devotions, or still others (often those who are more hesitant about ‘images’) have nevertheless found written accounts of the death of Christ can serve the same meditative purposes.

By way of connecting the previous three sections, the gospels record Jesus’ practice of lament during the passion week. Following the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, Jesus weeps over the waywardness and unrepentance of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). In Gethsemane, he pleads with the Father to avoid the imminent suffering. From the cross, Jesus prays/laments the first line of Psalm 22 (Matt. 27:46). Jesus’ practice of lament arguably provides an example Christians may follow in their times of suffering.

When observing Christians who deal with suffering, it might prove interesting to ask what practices (if any) they employ to help them identify with Christ in his suffering. Do they engage in any form of ‘meditation,’ whether through the use of a cross or icons or literature that highlight Christ’s own suffering? Have they found these practices helpful or not?

Spiritual Surrender and Trust

Trust accepts the epistemic situation of limited knowledge, but commits to the trusted person nonetheless. Suffering causes doubt, but need not erase experiences of love and care. “Trust comes from some experience of the other person, an experience not reducible to proof. Most often, it grows up in a relationship of mutual love, one in which we have loved, and been loved by, the other.”⁴⁶ Manning continues: “Though Job is beset by suffering and loss on every side, his trust endures even when understanding fails. The scriptural document does not present

⁴⁶ Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin’s Path to God* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2000): 98.

his experience as a way to understand evil but as a way to live with it. The story of Job implicitly states that we can endure the unwanted intrusion of evil when we have experienced a theophany - that is, an insight into the reality of God.”⁴⁷

Listening

Misplaced words and “preemptive assurance”⁴⁸ are regularly cited as key missteps performed by the companions of sufferers. Among Christians, citing Bible passages is frequently used with the intention of comfort, but frequently received as invalidating or dismissing.

Both silence and listening are accompanied by suffering. We regularly speak to regain control.⁴⁹ When engaging with someone who is suffering, we suffer, too. As McHugh explains “our approach to people in pain can amount to self-therapy. We start to feel that tightening in our chest, that knot of anxiety in our stomachs, and we want our heart to stop accelerating. So we take another’s situation as an opportunity to soothe and reassure ourselves, but we miss them in the process because we are too busy projecting on them.”⁵⁰ Speaking can be a means of relieving one’s own suffering.

Listening goes a step beyond silence by not merely tolerating the ambiguity but by entering empathically into someone’s painful circumstances. This means taking on the suffering of the other and thereby experiencing more of it (II Cor. 1:3-7).

Silence

Silence is the natural partner of listening. It is also the partner to solitude (see below). Just as discernment is needed by the companions of sufferers to determine when to speak and

⁴⁷ Manning, 98.

⁴⁸ Adam S. McHugh, *The Listening Life: Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015): 162.

⁴⁹ Foster

⁵⁰ McHugh, 168.

when to be silent, so do those who suffer need such discernment. McHugh contends, “the most critical element in speaking truth is not content or conviction but timing.”⁵¹

One potentially puzzling passage in this regard is Lamentations 3:25-30:

[25] The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.
[26] It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.
[27] It is good for a man that he bear
the yoke in his youth.
[28] Let him sit alone in silence
when it is laid on him;
[29] let him put his mouth in the dust—
there may yet be hope;
[30] let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,
and let him be filled with insults. (ESV)

The passage is puzzling given its context: it occurs within a book focused on lament, that is, crying out to God, often noisily. A potential resolution of this conundrum is to think of this passage as being in the genre of wisdom, rather than in lament. If so, then discernment is needed to determine when silence and speech are contextually appropriate. Potential conclusions include the following: 1) Wise implementation of contrary practices in response to suffering requires contextual discernment. 2) Silence is appropriate in the face of suffering: a) when there is temptation to accuse God of wrong-doing, b) as an expression of trust in God, c) when there is temptation toward self-justification apart from God’s vindication, d) when there is temptation toward retaliation, or e) when we are able to affirm the suffering being experienced as being for the purpose of God’s will. 3) Speech is appropriate in the face of suffering when directed toward God in prayer (including lament and complaint).

Silence can also be a component of shock or numbness, rather than a prescription for the engagement with suffering. Swinton links this kind of silence to Jesus’ silence on the cross as

⁵¹ McHugh, 172.

follows: “The silence of Jesus is a statement that God not only empathizes with suffering ‘from a distance,’ but also actually experiences it in all of its horror. The cross of Jesus reveals that God is with us and for us in the midst of the most horrendous and undeserved suffering.”⁵² Swinton goes on to link this experience of silence to the need for the companions of sufferers to “learn the practice of listening to silences.”⁵³ He continues: “As we listen to the silence of Jesus, we recognize that the sufferer’s experience of distance from God is not necessarily a mark of faithlessness . . . The silence of Jesus on the cross is a liberating force that reveals God’s solidarity with the sufferer, not in unrealistic platitudes or false expectations, but in total identification and solidarity.”⁵⁴

A third kind of silence bears mention in relationship to suffering and that is the silence that has been imposed upon a sufferer. Such silence can be imposed in many ways: cultural expectations, oppression, or even self-silencing. Given the value of articulating one’s suffering, imposing silence causes yet more suffering.

Solitude

Contemporary spiritual writers note the challenges our culture poses to being alone and quiet. Of the distractions of his own day, Pascal implied that sitting quietly in one’s own room would be a form of suffering for many. Hastings expresses the valuable role of solitude in his grieving process in this way: “times alone were necessary as the grief journey progressed, mainly because it is easy to cover up the deeper movements of the soul with activity and distraction, even work of a spiritual kind.”⁵⁵ Even more, the pull of productivity and busyness threatens to stifle the spiritual sensitivity opened up by suffering. Just as preemptive words can be unhelpful

⁵² Swinton 100.

⁵³ Swinton 101.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hastings, 143.

when offered to others who suffer because they shortchange the emotional process, Hastings' observation suggests that communication can be preemptive for the sufferer as well.

Sanctification

Psychologists of religion have investigated the construct of sanctification, which must be distinguished from the Christian conception of growth in holiness or being set apart for God's purposes. In the psychological literature, sanctification is seeing a particular aspect of one's life as imbued with divine purpose. For those domains that have been studied, such as marriage or motherhood, sanctification has been shown to yield positive outcomes and to be distinguished from the outcomes experienced by those who do not similarly sanctify their activities.⁵⁶ Like the theological conception of sanctification, psychological sanctification involves a consecration process of a thing, event, or relationship. There is some empirical evidence that suffering can also be sanctified.⁵⁷

Community

In the wake of the Enlightenment and Modernity, leading Christian thinkers commonly felt the pressure to provide logical explanations or theodicies for the 'problem of suffering'. Yet, in the ancient Church, while the 'problem of evil' was just as known and experienced, the early Church did not think its primary responsibility was to philosophically explain *why* or *how* this could happen. Instead, these believers responded primarily with *practices* rather than answers. For pre-enlightenment Christians, the problem of suffering and evil was less of a philosophical

⁵⁶ M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Kerris L. M. Oates, Tamara L. Anderson, and Michele M. Willingham, "Calling and Conflict: The Sanctification of Work in Working Mothers, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4 no. 1 (2012): 71-83. Jacqueline Davis, Kerry Horrell, Tamara L. Anderson, and M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, "Religious and Role Contributions to the Marital Satisfaction of Evangelical Women," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 46 no. 3 (2018): 184-198. doi: 10.1177/0091647118794244

⁵⁷ M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Laura Shannonhouse, Jamie Aten, Jason McMartin, and Eric Silverman, "The Varieties of Redemptive Experiences: A Qualitative Study of Meaning-making in Evangelical Christian Cancer Patients," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, (2018): 9.

problem to be solved than a “practical challenge for the Christian community.”⁵⁸ Consequently, “ancient Christians responded with a set of practices and ways of living together with grace, solidarity, and promise amid the pain.”⁵⁹

While we can see this historic development at the level of leading authors, even today at the local Church level it may be that Christian community *practices* remain just as formative and central. For example, amid Christian communities we find the consistent need for expressions of shared commitment, witness, compassion, particularity, mission, and confidence [an extended treatment of each of these terms and their guiding importance is included below near the end of the document]. Christian approaches to suffering aim for both the one who suffers as well as their caregivers to find strength and love by their connection to the Body of Christ. All of the weight of the suffering is not meant to fall on an isolated person: the Church is meant to bear one another’s burdens in its shared commitments. God’s people listen and testify not only to God’s faithfulness, but also they witness one another’s real tragedies and pain. For example, the African-American Church has long modeled the expression of bearing ‘witness’ both to real human suffering (‘I see that!’) and to transformative hope based on the Gospel (‘look what Jesus has done’).

Similarly, at its best, the Church has affirmed both the universal experience of suffering and the particularity of how it is experienced by each individual. Yet, even amid pain and suffering, Christians encourage the sufferer to lift their gaze, to see what God is doing in the larger world and even in their lives: in this way, even the weak are able to live a life of mission and purpose. Here significant meaning-making often happens. Finally, the community serves to

⁵⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 52.

⁵⁹ Kapic, *Embodied Hope*, 21.

strengthen each part in confidence in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and in the fellowship of the Spirit. But such love, grace, and fellowship are normally experienced in the presence of the saints, rather than in their absence.⁶⁰

As isolated individuals, faith too easily falters. But when the organic community of Christ is bound together by the Spirit, joy can be experienced even amid pain, hope can arise even when faced with dismal doctor reports, and meaning can be found even when outsiders only see loss. Christianity aims to hold together the whole and the part, the community and the individual, the one and the many.

In this way, Christians are called to treat one another not merely as members of an organization, but as a family. Christian commitment means that when one suffers, it is nothing less than your sister or mother or brother who suffers. Furthermore, this family of God cultivates not merely blood relations, but what might be called spiritual friendship. The young and old, male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free: in Christ, each is linked together in love and life. In this way, one observes unexpected friendships arise that defy cultural expectations and accepted norms. Bearing one another's burdens, deep friendships of mutual dependence and grace are born and cultivated. Whether the metaphor is of family or friendship, the people of God find themselves linked to others so that they will grieve, mourn, and celebrate together.

Community Practices: Sacraments/Ordinances

Perhaps all of the sacraments and ordinances of the church, as means of grace, could be discussed in relationship to suffering. Here, we'll just cover a few that seem particularly salient.

⁶⁰ Obviously, individuals also report of God meeting them when they are alone, and many even have mystical experiences. This comment is not to take away from those more individualistic experiences, but it is to recognize that historically even these have been understood to grow out of the Church, rather than to be at odds with the Church. Thus, for example, monks were still normally meant to follow something like the Benedictine rule together. Again, this kind of dynamic reveals the Church's attempt to honor both the universal and particular aspects of human experience.

Eucharist

Despite many theological differences, nearly all Christians include a regular observance of Christ's sufferings within their corporate worship, and thus regularly identify with those sufferings. Instituted by Jesus and reaffirmed by Paul, Christians celebrate the Eucharist in remembrance of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus on the cross (Luke 22:19-20).⁶¹

Hastings includes a brief discussion of the practice of the Lord's Supper as "one of the most comforting and healing of the ecclesial practices" following the passing of his wife from cancer.⁶² Being united with Christ through the cross, the Eucharist draws us into closer communion by being drawn into participation with the bodily ascended Lord.

John Paul II implicitly links the Eucharist with participation in Christ's sufferings:

Those who share in Christ's sufferings have before their eyes the paschal mystery of the cross and resurrection, in which Christ descends, in a first phase, to the ultimate limits of human weakness and impotence: indeed, he dies nailed to the cross. But if at the same time in this *weakness* there is accomplished his *lifting up*, confirmed by the power of the resurrection, then this means that the weaknesses of all human sufferings are capable of being infused with the same power of God manifested in Christ's cross.⁶³

In the paschal mystery Christ began *the union with man in the community of the Church*. The mystery of the Church is expressed in this: that already in the act of Baptism, which brings about a configuration with Christ, and then through his sacrifice - sacramentally through the Eucharist - the Church is continually being built up spiritually as the Body of Christ.⁶⁴

Without going into too much detail on the theology here, John Paul II describes Christ's suffering as an offering of love to humanity; the Eucharist becomes a means for opening oneself

⁶¹ Dan G. McCartney, "Suffering and the Goodness of God in the Gospels." In *Suffering and the Goodness of God*. Edited by Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008): 88-90.

⁶² W. Ross Hastings, *Where Do Broken Hearts Go? An Integrative, Participational Theology of Grief* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016): 138.

⁶³ John Paul II, *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2014): 58.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

up to and identification with that loving offer. The second quotation mentions baptism, about which similar statements could perhaps be made.

In the Lord's Supper someone else calls us to the table and offers us the body and blood of our Savior. Someone else repeats the words of Christ, "This is my body, broken for you... This is my blood, shed for you." Our confession produces not fear or embarrassment, but receptivity to the grace of the Son's condescension—he came low to lift us high. He hears our confession, not to mock us, nor to shame us, but to liberate us in forgiveness and grace. These are the marks of his Kingdom.

Anointing of the Sick; Extreme Unction

James 5:14 reads "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (ESV). The word translated "sick" here can include all kinds of circumstances, including being spiritually weak. Most likely, physical illness is primarily in view. In the ancient world, oil was regularly used for medicinal purposes. It served as a kind of prophylactic to cover a wound, in much the same ways that antibiotic ointments are used today. Thus anointing with oil was a physical action that carried symbolism of consecration (separation) for the Lord. It had both physical and spiritual functions and helped to unite a sick person to the church community, even if bedridden.

In Roman Catholicism, anointing the sick is one of seven sacraments. Much of its practice historically was narrowed to instances of imminent death and so was sometimes called extreme unction and then would be closely connected to last rites. Efforts have been made from time to time to broaden the practice of anointing beyond imminent death. If the administration of the sacrament is to be extended beyond those who are dying, then a variety of practical guidelines become appropriate. Interestingly, Robilliard provides this advice: "he who visits the

sick, and especially the dying, must have a great love of silence, after the example of Mary at the foot of the Cross, who certainly kept from ‘saying’ anything in the face of such a great mystery.”⁶⁵ Throughout, Robilliard provides practical guidance requiring discernment and wisdom so that the various actions taken will “do good, not harm.”⁶⁶

James writes that the elders play a special role (Js. 5:14) with regard to the sick. It is worth noting that it has not always been agreed that these “elders” were necessarily the ordained clergy: Martin Luther, for example, suggested that this passage points to older and more experienced members of the congregation, but not necessarily ordained persons.⁶⁷ Calvin similarly stresses here not a sacrament of a “whispering confessional” but rather of the need for mutuality, including confession and prayer by fellow pilgrims.⁶⁸ But many if not most read the particular reference to ‘elders’ as indicating the ordained leaders of the local congregation. These elders, chosen by the Church, are the voice of the Body, speaking with the authority that is theirs to the degree that they faithfully reflect the Gospel. The Church is called to remain true to the message of the prophets and apostles, to “bind” and “loose” by calling for repentance and extending forgiveness and grace, all in the name of Jesus (Matt. 16: 19; 18:18). Jesus tells his disciples, “if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (Jn. 20:23). In other words, God’s people are not at risk of being more just or more gracious than God himself. In Jesus’ name the Church, most clearly through her ordained leaders, offers the words of pardon and assurance. This is not because they themselves make God loving or kind, but because they represent his divine mercy and grace. They embody

⁶⁵ J.A. Robilliard, “Extreme Unction.” In *Christ in his Sacraments*, Theology Library, Vol. 6. Edited by A.M. Henry. Translated by Angeline Bouchard. (Chicago: Fides Publishers, 1958): 297.

⁶⁶ 298.

⁶⁷ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in *Word and Sacrament*, vol. 2, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz, in *The Works of Martin Luther*, Vol. 36 (Charlottesville: Fortress Press, 1959): Part 1. Ch. 1.7, p. 120.

⁶⁸ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries* (West Sussex, Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 304.

the opportunity for faith, repentance, and love. They, at their best, represent divine hospitality, compassion, and life.

Marriage

In the Catholic Church, marriage is another of seven sacraments. As discussed below, any human relationship can be a source of comfort in the midst of suffering. St. Paul hints that marriage may also be a source of suffering: “those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that” (I Cor. 7:28, NRSV). It is not entirely clear what Paul means here, but many ancient writers took a negative view of marriage and its trials.⁶⁹ In any case, we may affirm that significant relationships can be a source of suffering.

Christian Meanings Made: Outcomes of the Meaning Making Process

The previous section provides categories of activities that can be used as resources in the meaning-making process, which can result in positive outcomes that increase flourishing. Some of these activities also name outcomes of the process. For example, giving thanks or being grateful can be a significant meaning-making process; possessing a disposition toward gratitude or having the virtue of being grateful can be the result or outcome of a meaning-making process. Though often employing similar terms, these two components should be kept distinct as occupying different places within the model. Park’s model attempts to distinguish clearly between processes (meaning-making) and outcomes (meanings made).

Meanings made can include having made sense, acceptance, causal attribution, growth and positive life changes, identity reconstruction, reappraisal of the stressor, or changed global beliefs, goals, or purposes.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ David E. Garland, *I Corinthians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003): 327.

⁷⁰ Park, “Making Sense of the Meaning Literature,” 260-261.

One of the most important meaning-making concepts in Christianity is the idea that the ultimate purpose of human life consists in being in relationship with God and secondarily with others. Moral, spiritual, emotional, and physical development are subordinate to the purposes of relationship. Accordingly, in times of suffering, the Christian can seek goods oriented toward relationship, despite the loss of the lesser goods such as health and physical well-being. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism claims, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.”⁷¹ Christianity portrays enjoying communion with God as the central goal to life, both on earth and in eternity. Accordingly, the ultimate goals Christianity places before humanity are moral and spiritual rather than earthly, materialistic, or hedonistic.

Flourishing

Sometimes referred to as ‘happiness’, ‘the blessed life’, or eudaimonia, to flourish is to attain the goods constituent of a fulfilled human life. However, there are many competing theories concerning the contents of the flourishing human life including: virtue, fulfilled desires, pleasure, union with God, existence/being itself, or some objective list combining many things such as physical health, close relationships, important knowledge, as well as possibly pleasure, fulfilled desires, union with God, etc. Of course, on all plausible interpretations of Christianity the central--although not necessarily sole--constituent of the flourishing life is the individual’s connectedness with God.

Pleasure as flourishing

One common contemporary view of flourishing is hedonism. According to hedonism the only constituent(s) of human well-being consists in obtaining pleasure and/or avoiding pain. Advocates of this view sometimes measure pleasure and pain in quantified units referred to as

⁷¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism, 1647, www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds3.iv.xviii.html.

hedons. For example, Bill Gates spending a million dollars on his tenth yacht might be measured as bringing him 100 hedons, but spending a million dollars to help 1,000 starving refugees might bring them a total of 1,000,000 hedons of pleasure. Note that there can be complex variations of hedonism, for example J.S. Mill talks not only about the quantity of pleasure but also the relative quality of pleasure. He claims some pleasures such as intellectual or aesthetic pleasures are superior to strictly physical pleasure. However, for most mainstream accounts of hedonism, it is sufficient to note that it takes pleasure/avoiding pain as the sole constituent of human well-being. Other goods are only important to well-being indirectly as a means to attaining pleasure. It is noteworthy that a hedonistic account of well-being is not necessarily identical to a hedonistic account of morality. There might be other values that are more important to pursue morally, but that do not have to do directly with human well-being such as following the Kantian moral law which is constituted by the dictates of reason or obeying divine commands.

Christians have had a range of opinions concerning the value of pleasure. The opinions have ranged from the stoic view endorsed by many of the ‘desert fathers’ that earthly physical pleasure is utterly unimportant and no part of human flourishing. More often, Christians have viewed pleasure as a genuine good created by God, but pleasure (or at least physical pleasure) is a lesser good that ought not be prioritized over more important goods like virtue or union with God.

Desire Fulfillment as human flourishing

On the desire fulfillment view of flourishing, the sole constituent of human well-being is that human being’s fulfilled desires. The number of fulfilled desires is important for determining overall well-being, as well as the desires’ relative importance to the person, and how long these desires stay fulfilled. So, my desire for a hot breakfast may contribute much less to my well-

being than my desire for my son to survive. Similarly, the length of time that a desire is fulfilled affects how much it contributes to well-being. A desire for a happy marriage that is fulfilled for 2 years contributes less to well-being than a desire for a happy marriage that lasts 50 years. Note that many events that contribute to well-being on the hedonistic account will also contribute to well-being on the desire fulfillment account since typically fulfilled desires are pleasurable. Some exceptions: desires that are fulfilled without the person knowing that they are fulfilled, desires with unexpected negative consequences, the desires of someone in a depression [certain psychological states may prevent fulfilled desires from resulting in pleasure] and self-destructive desires. Furthermore, most people desire at least some things that are pleasurable.

One way to bring the desire fulfillment theory closer to traditional Christian views is to stipulate that each human has certain innate desires in light of human nature, such as a desire for union with God. However, a person may not be fully aware of these desires. Furthermore, our desires may be clouded by human sinfulness, which causes us to misunderstand or misprioritize our desires.

Objective List Theories

Objective list theories of flourishing simply view numerous goods as contributing to human well-being. There are numerous list theories of well-being, but philosopher Brad Hooker says their usual components include, “. . . autonomy, friendship, knowledge of important matters, achievement, and perhaps the appreciation of beauty. List theorists can add that our pleasure also constitutes a benefit to us.”⁷² Some Christians including Thomas Aquinas have advocated a complex list of theories of human flourishing. They may distinguish between perfect heavenly flourishing and imperfect earthly flourishing. But, in each case the most important constituent of

⁷² Brad Hooker, “Is Moral Virtue a Benefit to the Agent?” in *How Should One Live?* Ed. Roger Crisp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 143.

human flourishing is union with God. The advantage of list theories is that they acknowledge the ‘common sense’ intuition that well-being doesn’t consist in just one thing, but includes several constituents. However, they also suffer from theoretical complexity. For each ‘good’ constituting an aspect of well-being that is included in a list, we need an explanation for why that good belongs on the list. Similarly, for any potential good that might be included on the list that someone wishes to exclude, we need an explanation for why that good should not be on the list of things that constitute well-being.

Virtue Perfection

A historically popular view of flourishing from foundational Western thinkers like Plato and Aristotle is perfectionism, but it is currently out of favor in many corners of philosophy and psychology. Perfectionism claims that virtue constitutes the central good to benefit the human agent. According to this account, becoming an ideal specimen of its species is the main or only good that contributes to an agent’s well-being. Typically, perfectionist accounts stipulate that there are numerous potentials in humanity that are only actualized as the agent develops virtue. If love actualizes an ideal human potential, then possessing it benefits the loving person. Many traditional Christian accounts portray virtue as an important contributor to human flourishing, but the reasoning has differed from case to case. The most important recurring idea is that some kind of virtue is necessary for or even part of the human union with God.

“Health and Wealth”

Though perhaps not described as views of flourishing, health and wealth accounts of happiness and well-being propose a theory of the good life. They may bear some similarity to objective list theories, but the scope of the list is narrower, and one might argue, reductionistic. On these views, the goals of life are material and physical satisfaction. The means are spiritual.

Through faith, prayer, and proper religious observance, healing and wealth can be attained.

Material and physical well-being are undoubted goods, the question concerns their relationship to other goods. If they are thought to be the only or primary goods, then suffering will be inimical to them.

Flourishing and Meaning-making

How meaning making can bring about flourishing: If we hold to something like a complex objective list theory of well-being, then meaning making can help us recontextualize certain kinds of negative experiences as part of a more important narrative of flourishing. If I experience pain, but can make meaning by construing pain as part of virtue development on the path towards experiencing God more intimately, then the way I interpret that pain will be more conducive to flourishing.

Virtuous Traits

Virtues are one of the central meaning-making concepts in the Christian tradition. Developing virtues, deeply embedded character traits embodying intellectual, moral, volitional, and emotional excellences, are at the center of the Christian concept of moral development and are a means by which we fulfill our purpose to become like Jesus. Since we live in a good, but fallen world our dispositions have naturally good potentials yet are twisted from their original virtuous functioning. Since God cares about the character of the individual, Christians have long believed that divine aid for character development through the indwelling Holy Spirit is a normal part of the Christian experience. Ideal traits enable humans to live well on earth. Yet, the ultimate potential for humanity is eternal communion with God. Supernaturally empowered virtues make us more God-like and better prepared to experience intimate closeness with God both in this life and the afterlife. Spiritual practices create the contexts within which the virtues

are developed. Christian scripture links suffering with specific virtues such as obedience (Hebrews 5:8), empathy, compassion (Hebrews 2:18), perseverance (James 1:2-4), and hope (Romans 5:3-5).

Many practices and virtues may be valued across several religions, but some of them may receive varying emphasis in different religions. The primary virtues within Christianity likely differ from those made central in other religions. For example, developing the thought of St. Paul (I Corinthians 13), Thomas Aquinas emphasized the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (*ST* I-II q. 62 and q. 65). Their primacy derives from their role in directing people to God and the way in which they inform and give life to the other virtues. Some virtues are valued by several religions, but may be understood and expressed in distinctive ways in the context of specific religions. For example, within Christianity, humility is grounded in imitation of Christ's humility, which expressed itself most powerfully in a painful and humiliating death (Philippians 2:5). Greenway, Barrett, and Furrow point out that this humility is expressed in submission, not only to those in authority, but to equals, and for the good of the other.⁷³

All of these virtues and practices are developed within Christian community, the church. A faith community committed to Christ made up of individuals with whom one shares life including the reality of suffering in difficult times can serve in meaning making. Sharing suffering with co-religionists is a way of reducing personal suffering and drawing upon the strength of the community. Embracing dependency upon others during times of suffering can cause an increase in intimacy of relationships. The relational context of suffering helps shape shared meaning during times of hardship.

⁷³ Tyler S. Greenway, Justin L. Barrett, and James L. Furrow, "Theology and Thriving: Teleological Considerations Based on the Doctrines of Christology and Soteriology," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 4 no. 3) (2016): 179-189.

Fortitude

Several virtues would appear only to be gained by means of suffering. Among these are the constellation of virtues associated with courage and fortitude: perseverance, patience, resilience, etc. Fortitude helps us to persevere in times of overwhelming challenges, make meaning, and remain faithful through periods of adversity. Within the Christian tradition, fortitude and courage are commonly associated with pursuing good in the face of fear and hardship.⁷⁴

Intellectual Humility

Two closely intertwined concepts within Christianity are intellectual humility and mystery. Humility is the proper response in the face of that which cannot be understood. Mystery is the reality that there are matters that only God fully understands and that go beyond intrinsic human limitations as creatures and as secondary agents within the divine narrative. These two constructs and related practices and attitudes can serve to aid in meaning making in times of crisis. Acceptance of suffering, including instances when its causes are unknown, are significant expressions of humility. As Wolterstorff explains, “some suffering is easily seen to be the result of our sin: war, assault, poverty amidst plenty, the hurtful word. And maybe some chastisement. But not all. The meaning of the remainder is not told us. It eludes us. Our net of meaning is too small. There’s more to our suffering than our guilt.”⁷⁵ Since many instances of suffering have no direct explanation, those who suffer may grow in their humility. As an example, from a qualitative psychological study, one cancer survivor described relinquishing his attempts to control his life by being physically fit. He moved to a mode of spiritual surrender in which he

⁷⁴ Jason McMartin, “The Virtue of Courage in the Western Philosophical Tradition,” in Celinski, M.J., & Gow, K.M. (Eds.). *Continuity versus Creative Response to Challenge: The Primacy of Resilience and Resourcefulness in Life and Therapy* (New York: Nova Science Publishers).

⁷⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 74.

sought to “release and let God be God.”⁷⁶ Meaning making will not be the same thing as (comprehensive) understanding, since the human perspective is limited.

Holiness

Both Christian virtues and practices have the effect of cultivating holiness. Holiness is living a life that is set apart to God and keeping one’s self free from being polluted by the evils rejected by God. Accordingly, holiness is an important aspect of Christian moral development.

Notably, there is both a positive and a negative connotation to holiness. The primary connotation is the positive commitment to a sacred life set apart from mundane unspiritual lives for the pursuit of God. The negative connotation of holiness is the accompanying implicit commitment to reject entanglements that act as a barrier to living a life set apart to God. This dual dynamic in holiness is analogous to the dual dynamic within traditional marriage. Marriage is primary a positive commitment to embrace a specific person in unique, deeply intimate, ways, but also includes an implicit negative commitment to rejecting entanglements with others (romantic and otherwise) that would act as barriers to fulfilling marital commitments to one’s spouse.

Joy

James 1:2-4 “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (NIV)

One Christian pattern offered here for addressing difficulties in life is to take joy in ‘trials’ (presumably including general difficulties in life, harms, and sufferings), to consider its

⁷⁶ M. Elizabeth Hall, Laura Shannonhouse, Jamie Aten, Jason McMartin, and Eric Silverman, “The Varieties of Redemptive Experiences: A Qualitative Study of Meaning-making in Evangelical Christian Cancer Patients,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, (2018): 9.

effect on something more valuable--our character. In this case, the development of mature, complete character, marked by perseverance.

Virtuous Traits: Theological Virtues

Many traditional Christian theologians like Thomas Aquinas believe that in addition to traditional secular moral and intellectual virtues, there are also God-oriented dispositions that can only be supernaturally obtained: faith, hope, and love. These capacities differ from other virtues in that they must be supernaturally infused by God. When infused, humans are able to contemplate and enjoy God's divine essence. Contemplating the divine essence is the central activity of perfect eternal happiness in the afterlife. These virtues go beyond natural human potential, which is why Aquinas speaks of humanity as having both earthly and heavenly ends.

That which is above man's nature is distinct from that which is according to his nature. But the theological virtues are above man's nature.... the object of the theological virtues is God Himself, who is the last end of all, as surpassing the knowledge of our reason.⁷⁷

The sequential ordering of the theological virtues in Aquinas's *Summa* is not coincidental. While charity is explicitly identified as the greatest of the virtues, faith and hope appear first in the *Summa* since Aquinas views them as necessary pre-conditions for the virtue of love. These virtues are logically prior to love in that they make love of God possible, since it is impossible to love God if one neither has faith in Him nor hopes in Him.

There is a logical ordering to the theological virtues. Faith is foundational, for one cannot hope in God for future happiness, or love God unless she first believes in God's existence. Hope is built upon faith as hope goes beyond merely believing in God's existence, but also requires viewing God as one's source of true fulfillment. Finally, love of God, through which one desires

⁷⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, Fathers of The English Dominican Province (tr.), Second and revised edition, (1920), online edition by Kevin Knight (2017) at www.newadvent.org, I-II.62.2

ongoing connectedness with God is only possible if one already believes in God's existence and already hopes in God for future happiness.

Aquinas's theological virtues also depart from the traditional Aristotelian model for virtue acquisition. The purest quality of virtue cannot be developed through Aristotelian mentoring and habituation alone. Both the God-centered theological virtues, which bring about potentials beyond normal earthly human nature as well as the best versions of the moral virtues must be infused by God rather than developed by human effort. In the words of Aquinas—following Augustine—such virtues are developed as, “God works in us, without us.”⁷⁸

Faith

As a construct in the Christian religion, faith can roughly be characterized as a virtuous human disposition toward confidence and trust in God, the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and the ultimate consummation of this world found in the eternal kingdom of God. In times of suffering, faith is relevant in two distinct ways. First and foremost, virtuous faith is embodied in valuing God, the things of God, the glory of God, and trust in God, regardless of circumstances, even in circumstances of suffering. This valuing of spiritual goods over worldly goods is the essence of the virtuous faith.

However, there is also a second use of the term faith that is more circumstantially oriented and that is not always virtuous. This kind of ‘faith’ is the confidence that current circumstances of suffering will turn out well in earthly terms. Notably, this second type of faith is not always justified and accordingly is not virtuous in some circumstances. Whether or not one has this second kind of faith, the more important type of faith is expressed in commitment to God and faith in God's goodness regardless of how earthly circumstances turn out.

⁷⁸ Some similar observations are made in Eric Silverman, *The Supremacy of Love: An Agape Centered Vision of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics* (Lexington Books: Lanham, MD, 2019), 52-53.

Hope

Hope is roughly the disposition toward pursuit of God, communion with God in the afterlife, and spiritual goods. Hope is particularly found in seeking after God and spiritual goods over earthly goods. Virtuous faith naturally leads to virtuous hope. Faith that the things of God are more important than the things of the earthly world naturally leads to hope embodied in the pursuit of those spiritual goods over earthly goods. The eschatological dimension of hope has been under-studied among psychologists of religion.

Love

A third central virtue in both the divine and human character is that of unselfish agape love. The commands to love God and other people are at the heart of the New Testament message and are literally identified by Christ as the greatest of all commandments three times in the gospels. Agape love is roughly a dispositional desire for the good of and relational unity with God and other humans as image bearers of God. Virtuous faith and hope focusing on God provides a foundation for love carried out within every aspect of a person's day to day life. Since love of God, rather than personal health, is the most central value of Christianity, in times of suffering seeking intimacy with God can be an important structure for meaning making.

Identity and Narrative

In close relationship to intellectual humility, suffering has the potential to reshape one's identity. Park notes briefly that a "potentially important outcome of meaning making involves identity reconstruction, shifts in one's personal biographical narrative as a result of experience."⁷⁹ The losses of various kinds of suffering often impinge closely on our sense of self, the roles and relationships we have. As a result, "loss leads to a confusion of identity. Since we

⁷⁹ Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature," 261.

understand ourselves in large measure by the roles we play and the relationships we have, we find ourselves in a vertigo when these are changed or lost.”⁸⁰ Our sense of self is closely connected to the story by means of which we make sense of our lives. Hauerwas suggests that “what bothers us even more about childhood suffering is that it makes us face our deepest suspicions that all of us lack a life story which would make us capable of responding to illness in a manner that would enable us to go on as individuals, as friends, as parents, and as a community.”⁸¹ In other words, life events threaten our global meaning systems and our sense of the meaningfulness of life. An outcome of the meaning making process can include a renewed sense of identity and a revised personal narrative. Hauerwas continues by saying, “I suspect that if Christian convictions have any guidance to give us about how we are to understand as well as respond to suffering, it is by helping us discover that our lives are located in God’s narrative – the God who has not abandoned us even when we or someone we care deeply about is ill.”⁸² Reappraisal of suffering can include placing our narrative within God’s, which situates our relationship with God and other people.⁸³

Purpose

As noted above, goals and purpose are thought to be components of meaning in life⁸⁴ and the meaning-making process; the loss of a sense of purpose and the perceived inability to fulfill one’s goals may be one of the most significant sources of distress arising from suffering. Suffering understandably prompts questions concerning God’s purposes or goals for us. Most

⁸⁰ Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*, expanded edition, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 81.

⁸¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 67.

⁸² Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*, 67.

⁸³ Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*, 148.

⁸⁴ Login S. George and Crystal L. Park. "Meaning in life as comprehension, purpose, and mattering: Toward integration and new research questions." *Review of General Psychology* 20, no. 3 (2016): 205-220. Roy F. Baumeister, *Meanings of life*. (New York: Guilford Press, 1991).

Christian thinkers have denied that God is the direct cause of evil and suffering. God is not the author of evil, otherwise God would be, in some sense, evil. While not causing evil, many Christian thinkers have continued to affirm that God still brings about divine purposes in the midst of evil. Some theologians have distinguished between God's active will and God's permissive will.⁸⁵ God actively wills things that God directly causes. Other things, such as evil and suffering, God allows to occur. They are permitted, even if not included in God's original creative intentions.

God's permission encourages reflection concerning the functions that suffering may serve. Christians have regularly affirmed that even though God is not the source of evil, God still works to bring good out of evil (e.g., Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28). We briefly summarize several such potential purposes or outcomes for suffering within the Christian worldview.⁸⁶ First, suffering provides an opportunity to help and comfort others who suffer. Second, growth in virtue and character can result from suffering. Third, suffering tests, proves, and strengthens one's faith. Fourth, suffering grants a story or testimony of God's faithfulness that one can share with others. Fifth, suffering can be an occasion for resisting and overcoming spiritual opposition. Sixth, suffering can serve to strengthen one's identification with Christ. Finally, suffering can serve to strengthen relationship and intimacy with God.

Some Christians have held that suffering is purposeless. Most commonly, this affirmation takes the form of describing a category of evils that are unredeemable (e.g., gratuitous evils). Another version denies the significance of suffering by relegating it to an "earthly" or physical reality that may be safely ignored in favor of "spiritual" reality. These views deny potential

⁸⁵ Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament*, 68 ff.

⁸⁶ This material is developed in more detail in Jason McMartin and M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, "Christian Views of Suffering: A Review and Critical Appraisal," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture*. (In press).

divine purpose in the midst of suffering, and also seem to contradict Christian affirmations of God's providence and redemptive work in the midst of suffering.

Future Research Trajectories and Potential Adjustments to the Model

There are several places for further exploration in relationship to this model. After this initial construction of an interface between Christian theology and the psychology of religion in the domain of suffering, what are the next steps to be taken?

First, by way of illustration, we have surveyed only a handful of Christian beliefs, practices, and virtues that may be salient to the meaning-making process in the midst of suffering and that may also be outcomes of the process (i.e., meanings made). Many other facets of the meaning-making process could be fruitfully brought into conversation with Park's model and with the social scientific literature on growth in the midst of suffering more generally.

Second, since we have begun to build out Park's model with theological concepts, we offer these back to psychologists to be empirically tested. This presentation is a first attempt to develop a Christian framework for the meaning making process. Future empirical study can consider which of these facets emerging from the Christian tradition are actually used by Christians. Then we can test the extent to which these meaning-making resources deliver on their promise to generate positive outcomes for those who suffer. For example, to date, only one empirical study has been conducted on the Christian practice of lament. Increased involvement with these psalms by college students was correlated with reports of intimacy with God.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Kimberly N. Snow, Mark R. McMinn, Rodger K. Bufford, and Irv A. Brendlinger, "Resolving Anger Toward God: Lament as an Avenue Toward Attachment," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 39, no. 2 (2011): 130-142.

Since some of the potentially identified resources will be underutilized by believers, we can consider potential interventions. How can we inculcate these beliefs, practices, and virtues among our congregants to equip them with resources for their seasons of suffering?

Third, several theoretical and theological questions may be asked as well. A significant portion of recent theological reflection on suffering and evil strenuously resists reasoning, answers, or meaning as being applicable to the experience of those who suffer.⁸⁸ It is argued that reasoning of this sort proves to be an imposition, perhaps unwelcome, that defines another person's experience of suffering without his or her consent. In the process, evil may be rationalized or treated as illusory. At times, it is suggested, such approaches perpetuate evil rather than alleviating it.⁸⁹ To what extent is the conceptualization of meaning-making within the psychology of religion susceptible to these criticisms? Is meaning-making relevantly similar to the construction of theodicies, and therefore subject to the same weaknesses? That theodicies can be harmful would appear to be an empirical claim; are there empirical findings in psychology to substantiate it?

A frequent theological criticism of attempts at theodicy is their reliance on modernistic worldview assumptions. It is said that the mania for mastery in the modern period overreached in attempting to remove the mystery of suffering.⁹⁰ As a discipline, psychology was birthed in modernist assumptions. Although steps can be taken toward mitigation, Park's model operates within a modernist psychological framework (or ideological surround) that assumes that self-conscious appropriation of meaning is essential to well-being.⁹¹ It is arguably the case that such

⁸⁸ Kopic, *Embodied Hope*, 17-26; Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament*, 27-33.

⁸⁹ John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 12-45; Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991).

⁹⁰ See, for example, Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*, 48-53.

⁹¹ It does not follow from this that Park's model itself is beset or hampered by such assumptions.

appropriation is not sufficient for well-being, and it may not be necessary.⁹² Similarly, psychology will tend to focus on immanent meaning, but Christian thought includes an eschatological dimension of meaning. Much of psychological research relies on self-report. In such instances, unless the person self-appraises that meanings have been made in the midst of suffering, then no meaning has ostensibly been made. And yet, as philosopher Eleonore Stump argues, a person can believe himself or herself to be experiencing health or well-being in its absence as well as the converse. If true, the theological concepts we have described above are the case whether a person acknowledges them or not. Empirically assessing their impact when they are unacknowledged introduces additional challenges. There are means to overcome limitations of self-report through varying approaches to psychological measurement.⁹³ Nevertheless, this remains a significant theoretical issue to broach in developing an interface between Christian theology and the psychology of religion.

Conclusion

While the importance of religious worldviews in meaning-making in the context of suffering has received substantial confirmation in the psychological literature, religions are not generic in their meaning-making resources. Religions differ regarding where suffering fits within the world and how suffering is conceptualized. They offer different ways of understanding how to make meaning, different practices to achieve meaning, and different goals toward which the sufferer should strive.

In this paper we have attempted to outline and offer some examples of these meaning-making resources from within one religion: Christianity. We have used Crystal Park's meaning-

⁹² Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 8-13.

⁹³ As Park herself notes: "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature," 291-292.

making model, showing how Christian beliefs, practices, and virtues inhabit all aspects of the model.

The model suggests that these Christian resources are intertwined in ways that further meaning-making. In other words, there may be specific pathways between religious beliefs, religious practices, and religious outcomes. An example may help clarify this idea. A Christian facing cancer might initially appraise the cancer diagnosis as a threat and loss (the situational meaning). Global beliefs in God's power and love (a global meaning) might lead to the Christian practice of lament (the religiously-influenced meaning-making process), in which the sense of threat and loss are presented to God, and faith in God's control of the situation is verbalized, ending with praise to God. This process of lament can lead to religiously-valued outcomes, including peace, perseverance, fortitude, and increased dependence on God. Finally, these outcomes result both in greater internalization of global beliefs, for example, a deeper sense of God's power and love, as well as a reappraisal of the stressor, for example, seeing the cancer as a vehicle for greater intimacy with God. Our call is to conduct more theologically-informed research on these Christian resources, in the hopes that this will advance our abilities to assist those who suffer to find meaning in the midst of their suffering.

Further Resources:

For more help on the topic of pain and suffering, a member of our core team (Kelly M. Kopic) has written a Christianity Today award-winning book which explores this difficult topic: [*Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering* \(Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017\)](#). We did not want to simply reproduce that volume here, but we encourage those interested in seeing his fuller treatment of the topic. In this book he explores 1) the

importance of our bodies and being honest about our pain (and not giving people cheap answers!), 2) what difference it makes that Jesus is fully human, and 3) how the church can faithfully love and care for those who are suffering.

For a few sample talks that might prove helpful:

- [“Faith, Hope, and Love: Reflections on Suffering”](#)
- [“‘I Need a Witness’: God’s Presence and our Pain.”](#)
- [“Pain, Confession, and Needing Each Other”](#)