An Existential-Phenomenological Approach to the Psychology of Religion

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Abstract A primary aspect of existential and phenomenological methodologies is an attempt to understand one's experience. In particular, phenomenology attempts to understand one's experience in as pure of a form as possible. From an existential perspective, additional emphasis is placed upon the lived aspects of one's experience. This paper outlines an existential-phenomenological approach to the psychology of religion. First, a brief history and summary of major themes of existential psychology is introduced. Next, this is applied to the psychology of religion. Last, the existential-phenomenological approach is considered in the context of the existential givens.

Keywords Existential · Phenomenological · Psychology of religion · Religious experience · Existential givens

The existential-phenomenological approach to the psychology of religion finds its roots in the philosophical traditions that preceded the development of formal psychology. The phenomenological tradition originated in the work of Husserl, while the existential tradition can be traced to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Existentialism and phenomenology often are grouped together, partially due to their shared focus on experience and similar methodologies. In particular, both phenomenological and existential psychology seek to understand one's experience in as pure of a form as possible. In this paper, in positioning existential first, I am placing existential psychology as the foundation, and most of the paper speaks primarily about existential psychology. However, the phenomenological dimension remains important in identifying the particular existential tradition being applied. Additionally, phenomenology adds important clarity to certain methodological issues.

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A brief history of the development of existential psychology

There are many approaches to existential psychology, emerging largely in three distinct but similar traditions.[1] The first strand of existential psychology emerged in Europe, primarily through the writings of Ludwig Binswanger and later Medard Boss (May 1958). This school is often referred to as *existential analysis*, and it continues to have its strongest presence in Europe. Second, Victor Frankl, (1959/1984, 1988), who is perhaps the most widely recognized existential psychology writer, developed logotherapy. Frankl began developing this theory prior to his time in the concentration camps in World War II; however, his experience in the camps was very formative in the development of contemporary logotherapy. Last, there is the American school of existential psychology, developed largely by Rollo May. May's interest, however, began through his studying of the European existential philosophers and psychologists, including Binswanger and Boss. May's first book on existential psychology, *Existence*, co-edited with Angel and Ellenberger, includes three chapters that are translations of Binswanger's papers (May et al. 1958). Additionally, the dedication of the book reads, "To Eugene Minkowski, pioneer in phenomenological psychiatry, Ludwig Binswanger, explorer in existential analysis, and to all those in the science of man who have opened new realms in our understanding of what it means to be human." This dedication in the first book on existential psychology published in the United States is evidence of a strong influence from the European existential analysis movement and from phenomenological psychology. Thus, this American school is sometimes called existential-phenomenological psychology. All three of these schools of thought share similar influences, methodology, and values and often draw from each other. Yet, they do have some subtle differences.

This paper draws primarily on the existential-phenomenological school developed in the United States largely through the influence of Rollo May and his colleagues. From early on, existential psychology found a home within the broader movement of humanistic psychology and therefore sometimes is also referred to as humanistic-existential psychology or existential-humanistic psychology. Two schools played an important role in the development of existential psychology: Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Saybrook Graduate Institute and Research Center (now Saybrook University) in San Francisco, California.

Although many view existential psychology as primarily a theoretical and philosophical school of thought, both Duquesne University and Saybrook University have strong research traditions. These schools, however, drew upon different research methodologies, particularly in the area of qualitative research. Amedeo Giorgi, in particular, played an important role in the development of phenomenological research methodology (see Giorgi 1985, 2009). Giorgi was a faculty member at Duquesne University when he took a sabbatical in Europe with the intention of developing a phenomenological research methodology comparable in rigor and sophistication to the quantitative approaches utilized by mainstream psychology. Giorgi later moved to Saybrook, where he continues as an executive faculty member. Recently, in the United States, qualitative research has been receiving increasing attention and acceptance within mainstream psychology, including as a stand-alone methodology as well as part of mixed-methods approaches to research.

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[1] A fourth, emergent tradition that is relevant to this article is Zhi Mian Therapy, developed by Xuefu Wang based upon the writings of Lu Xun. Increasingly, Zhi Mian is being identified as an indigenous Chinese Existential Psychology.

The reliance on a qualitative methodology, particularly those influenced by phenomenology, reflects several important themes relevant for an existential approach to the psychology of religion. These themes are briefly introduced at this point and then further examined in later sections of the paper. First, phenomenology focuses on one's subjective experience. Much of mainstream psychology in the West is concerned with objective science, which is reflected in models of psychology that focus on what is similar across individuals and is also reflected in external judgments, assumed to be objective, about what is the good life that people ought to seek. Second, phenomenology is interested in the meaning of facts, whether they be objective or subjective, and assumes there are always cultural and personal factors affecting the development of that meaning. For example, even if it could be established across various religions that God exists and that the fundamental quality of God is love, what this means varies tremendously across religions and cultures and even varies within religious groups. In other words, meaning is complex, always containing individual and shared elements. While much of Western mainstream psychology is interested primarily in the shared elements, existential psychology is interested in the intersection of the personal and shared elements. Last, phenomenology and qualitative methods tend to assume one can better understand the experience of individuals through utilizing multiple ways of knowing. Whereas much of psychology seeks to know objectively, existential psychology believes we should utilize explorations of personal experience, the arts, and objective methods when seeking to understand a topic.

Contemporary existential psychology has evolved significantly since its early formulations, reflected in a recent resurgence of interest. Through much of the 1980s and 1990s, mainstream psychology in the West became strongly rooted in objective, positivistic science and existential psychology became increasingly marginalized. In part, however, this declining interest in existential psychology occurred because existential psychological thought had become stagnant. More recently, a number of new developments set the stage for renewed interest. First, a philosophical paradigm shift toward postmodernism lessened the grip of objective, positivistic science, thereby creating openings to alternative and more inclusive ways of knowing (Hoffman 2009a). Second, Rollo May and, in particular, his protégé Kirk Schneider, developed existential-integrative psychology (Schneider and May 1995; Schneider 2008). The integrative approach provided a framework to integrate other psychological theories into an existential foundation. Also, this approach provided movement toward a third important factor: integration of a multicultural perspective. Schneider's (2008) *Existential Integrative Psychotherapy* contains several chapters offering perspectives from different cultural groups. The book *Existential Psychology East-West* by Hoffman et al. (2009b) extended this development to the international psychological community and prepared the way for the First International Conference on Existential Psychology held in Nanjing, China, in 2010. Last, a movement in psychotherapy toward the common factors of psychotherapy, which emphasized, in particular, relational factors important in therapeutic effectiveness, moved mainstream Western psychology in a direction consistent with a position advocated within existential and humanistic psychology for some time. This, along with the trend toward existential-integrative psychotherapy, led Bruce Wampold (2008), one of the most significant researchers of psychotherapy effectiveness, to provide an endorsement of existential therapy as meeting the criteria of being a scientifically supported therapy.

I have previously advocated that existential psychology still needs development pertaining to its adaptation to cultural differences (Hoffman 2009b). This represents both the primary challenge and primary opportunity for existential psychology in the near future.

Central themes in existential psychology

A definition of existential psychology is elusive. Yalom (1980), who is the best-known contemporary representative of existential psychology, believed that existential psychology was not a stand-alone therapy, a point often disputed by most people identifying as existential therapists. Existential psychology is also frequently misunderstood. For example, Bartz (2009) recently published an article titled "Theistic Existential Psychology" in *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality,* a journal of the American Psychological Association, with a striking number of factual errors and misrepresentations of existential psychology. However, there are some core themes that help to unite theories that could rightly be considered existential.

Hoffman (2009c) suggests that it is unlikely that there are any themes that all major existential theorists would agree upon, particularly if agreement on the interpretation of those themes is included as a criterion. Therefore, a better approach to determining what could be considered existential would be a collection of themes and values that most existentialists would agree upon, even if no one theme may get the agreement of all existentialists.

Although not a complete list, Hoffman (2009c) identifies several of the central themes that most existentialists agree upon:

1. A starting point that asks the question, "What does it mean to exist?" or "What is the meaning of existence?"
2. A focus on subjective experience.
3. A preference for holistic ways of knowing, or drawing upon multiple ways of knowing.
4. An emphasis on being honest about the human condition, or facing life as it is.
5. Concern for the basic existential givens of life, or core issues of existence that all people must face. These include:

   a. Death and human finitude
   b. Freedom and responsibility, or human agency
   c. Relationships, or the desire to be connected with other people yet distinct
   d. Meaning
   e. Human emotions[2]

From these themes, it is possible to begin understanding the core ideas of existential thought. These themes will be explored more in the context of the psychology of religion.

An existential-phenomenological psychology of religion

"Obviously, all religions fall short of their own ideals."
- Ernest Becker 1973

Existential psychology's relationship with religion can be confusing. It is common for people to perceive existential psychology as antithetical to religion and for others to perceive it as inherently religious. In part, this is because many of the people identified as early existentialists had strong feelings about religion. Soren Kierkegaard, the person most

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[2] Schneider (2010) proposes that the concept of awe could rightly be considered a sixth existential given; however, it is yet to be determined whether this will be accepted by other existential psychologists.

commonly identified as the originator of existentialism, was a Christian theologian. Other influential existentialists include Jewish theologian and philosopher Martin Buber and Christian theologian Paul Tillich. However, other existentialists, such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre, were quite negative toward religion. This trend continues into contemporary existential psychology with Irvin Yalom being a harsh critic of religion, while others, such as Schneider (2004, 2009) and myself (Hoffman 2007, 2008, 2009b) showing greater openness to the importance of religion in people's lives.

Rightly understood, existential psychology is neither pro-religion nor anti-religion. Instead, individual existential writers have vastly different conceptions about religion. Yet, there are still some common themes that could be considered to have more consistent agreement across existential writers. For one, religion can be agreed upon as imperfect and in need of critique. Most existentialists are concerned about uncritical religious belief, pressures toward excessive religious conformity, and religious extremism. Religion can also be seen as one of the most powerful sources for the development of a coherent meaning system, which is believed to be an important aspect of a healthy life. The challenge, then, is to examine the lived reality of religion with its potential for good as well as its potential for detriment, including the role that it plays in individual lives and in the collective expression of religion.

Applying the core themes to the psychology of religion

What does it mean to exist? The starting point of existential psychology has strong religious implications. Although religion may be bolder in suggesting specific answers to this question as compared to existential psychology, both share a belief in the fundamental importance of this question. Furthermore, religion and existential psychology both suggest that the answer to this question is important for guiding the way one lives one's life.

Subjectivity and experience The Sufi poet Rumi (2004) wrote,

> a person's presence is more to learn from
> than a book. A sufi's book is not composed
> with ink and alphabet. A scholar loves, and lives on,
> the marks of a pen. A sufi loves footprints! (p. 248)

These few lines of poetry show the shift from the ways of knowing of a scholar to the ways of knowing that emphasize experience. Footprints represent the path one has walked—one's lived experience.

The tension between ways of knowing in psychology is paralleled in religion. Theologians frequently seek a rational, objective style of knowing that is transferable as cognitive knowledge from individual to individual. It seeks a truth that is universal and applies equally to all people. However, mystics seek experiential knowledge, derived through contemplative and experiential forms. This knowledge is highly personal and not easily reduced to the mere marks of a pen.

In psychology, focus on the subjective is suggestive of several directions. First, it points toward the importance of religious and spiritual experience. Second, it directs attention to qualitative research or, at the least, the inclusion of qualitative approaches in more comprehensive research agendas and mixed-methods research. Third, it gives consideration to the meaning realms of religion, not simply what can be quantified or measured.

Holistic ways of knowing From an existential perspective, religions should be studied through multiple methodologies. Although the traditional psychological research methods are important, it is necessary to balance these with qualitative measures and other ways of knowing. This includes the subjective ways of knowing discussed previously but also suggests the importance of dialectical ways of knowing, contemplative ways of knowing, and ways of knowing through the arts. Although some ways of knowing may be considered to have greater credibility in certain realms of knowledge, reliance on a singular way of knowing is always limiting and prevents one from gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Being honest about the human condition From an existential perspective, the human condition is a mixture of potentials, including the potential for good and the potential for evil. Both of these are concurrently present in the individual and the collective. To neglect either of these potentials is to distort the human condition. According to Becker (1975), it is the denial of human limitation that provides the basis for evil. A slight expansion of this idea would be that not being honest about the human condition often provides a basis for evil. While facing life as it is may be painful, it is necessary to do so in order to cultivate the depths of potential meaning in life.

Xuefu Wang (2011) discusses the parallel between the existential idea of being honest about the human condition and the Chinese idea of *Zhi Mian,* which originated in the writing of Lu Xun. According to Wang, *Zhi Mian* can be understood to mean 'to face directly,' or 'facing life as it is.' This idea provides the basis for the approach to psychotherapy developed by Wang through his Zhi Mian Institute. Furthermore, it can rightly be considered a Chinese existential psychology.

Within existential thought, facing life directly is intimately tied to the existential givens. The existential givens represent universal issues, or challenges, that must be faced by all people. This can be a test of religion: how does the religion face the existential givens? Religions, at their best, help one live better in the face of the human condition. However, religions are often dangerous when they preach distortions of what it means to be human or encourage one to deny aspects of one's basic humanness.

The existential givens The existential givens have permeated the existential literature since its origins. The most famous cataloguing of the givens is that of Yalom (1980) in his book *Existential Psychotherapy.* Yalom's conception, however, has limitations and biases that are not agreed with by other existential scholars. For instance, Yalom's atheistic bias comes through in his language. He tends to emphasize the negative side, and the finality, of the givens. Other writers, such as Greening (1992), put the givens in a more positive light (see also Bugental 1965; Heery 2009; Hoffman 2009c). Greening (1992) refers to them as the *existential challenges*, which emphasizes a balance between the challenge and the opportunity associated with the givens. Yet, existentialist scholars are in strong general agreement that the existentialist givens cannot be resolved through easy answers; they always have a component of "challenge" to them.

One fundamental way people face the existential givens, as well as other existential challenges, is through myth. According to May (1991), myths are systems of meaning, often represented in stories or other artistic forms, which cannot be proven to be true. Often, myths reflect basic *truths* that are not *literally true*. For example, it is common for many cultures to use stories to teach children family and cultural values. Although these stories are fictional, the truths taught through the stories often reflect profound truths.

Elsewhere I wrote, "*myths represent the universality of the existential givens and the particularity of the cultural response to those givens*" (Cleare-Hoffman 2009, p. 264, italics in original). The five existential givens are realities that cannot be avoided in life; everyone must face them. However, there is no one answer to these givens that works for all people. Furthermore, culture plays an important role in determining what may be a healthy response to the givens. Stated differently, what is a healthy response to these givens in one culture may not be a healthy response for most people in another culture. The same may be true across religions.

In essence, the world religions could all be considered myths (Hoffman 2009b; May 1991). This is not to degrade religion or to state that religions are not true. Instead, this position advocates that religions cannot be proven to be true in an objective sense. Although religious people may deeply believe that there are signs that prove their religion to be true, in reality, if the truth of a religion were objectively true, there would not be the many religions that are represented in the world today. This is why many religions speak of "faith" and "belief" as much as they speak of truth.

Religions, then, serve as primary myths through which individuals face the existential givens. Similarly, it may be said that any religion that is sustainable must provide a way for its adherents to face the challenge of the existential givens. Indeed, it is quite evident that what are often considered the great world religions address these issues, although often in varied ways.

Religion best addresses the givens through faith that recognizes its limitations. Or, as Tillich (1957) puts it, faith must include doubt. Similarly, May (1975) states, "The relationship between commitment and doubt is by no means an antagonistic one. Commitment is healthiest when it is not without doubt, but in spite of it" (p. 21). Nietzsche (1889/1990) chimes in on this discussion, stating, "The desire for a strong faith is not the proof of a strong faith, rather the opposite. If one has it one may permit oneself the beautiful luxury of skepticism: one is secure enough, fixed enough for it" (p. 85).

At its best, religion can provide a sustainable meaning system that helps the individual or collective develop a meaningful life. At its worst, religion becomes a totalitarian system intolerant of differences and willing to engage in violence against anything that threatens its meaning system. Becker (1973) states:

> What is the ideal for mental health, then? A lived, compelling illusion [or myth] that does not lie about life, death, and reality; one honest enough to follow its own commandments: I mean, not to kill, not to take the lives of others to justify itself. (p. 204)

Although Becker's statement was intended more for the individual, it could be applied more broadly to religious groups to assess the health of individuals or religions. With this powerful tool, existential psychology can distinguish between healthy and unhealthy ways of being religious without making any explicit metaphysical or religious statements.

From an existential perspective, it is necessary to authentically confront the existential givens. Religion can be used to defend against the terror of the givens, or it can be used to face them authentically. Although much could be said about religion and the existential givens, this section focuses on the distinction between defending against and authentically facing the givens.

Death and human limitation An authentic facing of death must encompass more than faith in an afterlife. Religion often focuses too narrowly on the afterlife question, thereby not

giving sufficient attention to other aspects of death. For instance, people may believe there is something better after death but still fear the process of dying, worry about how family will be affected by their death, have a sense of missing their loved ones after death, or still worry about the unknown aspects of what occurs after death.

When my mentor, Robert Murney, was given a diagnosis that he knew signified that his life was nearly over, he was almost 80 years old. He felt good about how he had lived his life, and his deep religious beliefs provided a genuine answer to him about what he believed was in store after death. Yet, as he told me of this, and that he did not fear dying, I was struck with suspicion. I still could sense an emotional struggle, though he did not show much emotion. I listened intently as he continued to confide in me his processing of facing death. As I let go of my conceptions about what he must be struggling with, I was able hear his pain in a different way. He had a deep love for his wife, his children, and a few close friends, including myself. It was not that he worried about dying or what would occur after his death; his pain was that he loved us, and he had this sense that he would deeply miss us. Also, he worried about our suffering and grieving for him.

Death often becomes a painful, lonely process because people think they have the answers, and these answers prevent them from staying open to other struggles related to the reality of death. Kubler-Ross (1998) tells many stories of dying people who feel frustrated and alone because no one will talk with them about death, and no one will be honest with them about the fact that they are dying. Often, this is with good intentions, at least to some degree. There is a desire to protect the dying person from this painful reality. Yet, the dying person often knows that they are dying and just feels that much more isolated when they know the people who are supposed to be supporting them are not being honest with them.

The same protections often come with the grieving process after someone has died. In the United States, it is common to hear clichés such as "He or she is in a better place," "God wanted them to come home," or "It was God's will." These well-intentioned sayings miss the point, which often contributes to a greater sense of pain and aloneness for the grieving individual. Often, it is not that the grieving person is concerned with whether the person who died is in a better place, it is that they miss them, that they never got to say goodbye, or that they never got to work through some unresolved issues.

Death is painful. No faith, no words of comfort, nothing can take that away. Instead, dying and grieving for the dead is a process that one must go through in order to make meaning of life.

Religion can also provide a powerful means by which one can face death and loss. Moats (2010) conducted a qualitative research study of people who grew through the loss of a loved one, including people in China and the United States. Although he found some cultural differences, he found many similarities among those who found ways to grow through the loss of a loved one. For example, individuals in both cultures found ways to embrace the painful emotions. In China, these emotions were less often shared, and when they were shared it was generally with a small number of people, usually family members. Yet, they found a way to accept and work through the emotions. Additionally, these individuals were able to find sustaining meaning through relationships with their loved ones that could be carried with them. Often, rituals are used to create a lasting meaning. These rituals can be personal or shared; what is important is that they serve as a way to transform meaning into a symbolic form that can be sustainable over time.

Services or rituals to memorialize the person who has passed often are powerful ways to create sustaining meaning. These come in many varieties, from services to celebrate the departed one to services that help mourn the loss. From an existential perspective, it is not that there is one right way to do this, but rather what is necessary is that it helps those who

are mourning find meaning. Recently, I attended a memorial service for the passing of the wife of a friend. His wife had suffered with cancer for many years, and he felt some release along with the deep loss of her departing. At the funeral, several upbeat songs were played, intermixed with people sharing stories about his wife. At one point, one of his wife's favorite upbeat songs came on. My friend stood with a tambourine and began to dance. I could imagine that in many religious setting this would have been perceived as disrespect when a time of mourning was called for. Yet, little by little, everyone stood, began clapping, and danced. When I spoke with him a little before the funeral he told me that he was relieved his wife was no longer suffering and that he had release from his caregiver burdens, but that he felt incredibly lonely in their home without her. In that moment, when we all were dancing with my friend, I am certain he did not feel alone and neither did we.

Freedom and responsibility Freedom is a difficult thing for someone from the United States to talk about because our ideas of freedom are often quite askew. Americans often focus on political freedom, which is quite shallow when compared to what could be deemed *existential freedom*. Cleare-Hoffman (2009) provides a powerful examination of the existential concept of freedom from a particular cultural perspective. Accordingly, she advocates that freedom must be understood in the context of culture.

Cleare-Hoffman (2009) is from the Bahamas, which is a group of small islands off the coast of the United States primary inhabited by the descendants of African slaves brought to the islands through the slave trade. These African slaves did their best to preserve their connections with their culture through their religious beliefs and rituals. As part of this, they developed a festival called Junkanoo. In this festival, they dress in bright colors and hold a parade, singing and dancing to the beat of drums and other simple instruments. During the time of slavery, these Bahamians worked in the fields 12 to 14 hours a day with only 3 days off a year: Christmas, Boxing Day, and New Year's Day. On two of these 3 days they chose to celebrate Junkanoo, which was a celebration of their freedom. That is a much more profound freedom than most people in the United States realize.

Frankl (1984) similarly spoke of the freedom a person could have even when confined in a concentration camp during World War II. This again is a great testament to the ability of the human spirit to find freedom in the midst of such confinement. For Frankl, even if every other freedom was taken away, one still had the freedom to choose how one would face one's confinement and oppression.

These two expressions of freedom are quite powerful just to consider, let alone to live. Personally, I think of my privileged life and realize I will most likely never know such profound freedom. For Frankl as well as for the Bahamians, their expression of freedom was deeply connected with their religious and spiritual beliefs. Although it is easy to see similarities in their courage to embrace freedom in dire situations, it is also quite evident that their expressions of freedom were greatly shaped by their particular religious and cultural beliefs.

Many in the West suffer from a restricted understanding of freedom. They tend to reduce freedom to political freedom and to individualism. Yet, neither of these is necessarily connected to the type of freedom in which the existential writers are most interested. Choosing to be part of a collective can be a profound expression of freedom. Choosing to embrace one's culture, its norms, and its rituals can be one expression of freedom. Although many look to the United States to try to understand freedom, I think this is a mistake. In reality, we have a very poor understanding of freedom in the West and have much we can learn about healthy expressions of freedom from other cultures.

Relationships Existential psychology is often misunderstood as being highly individualistic. Yet, when examining the existential psychology literature, one quickly discovers that it is a highly relational approach that also gives consideration to the individual. Existential psychology views people as having a paradoxical need to be connected with others but also to be seen as an individual. Bugental (1999) uses the language of desiring to be *a-part-of* and *apart-from*.

Hoffman et al. (2009a) explore this in the context of understanding the self and culture. They purport that what is a healthy conception of the self in relation to others is partially determined by culture. In other words, it is not just that there are cultural differences in preference regarding how the self and the self in relation to others is understood and experienced, but rather the cultural differences partially determine what is healthy for individuals.

It is necessary for individuals to be able to integrate their individual needs (i.e., *being apart-from*) and their relational needs (i.e., *being a-part-of*). Religion, at its best, can help people to achieve this. Religion can provide a basis for community and relationships, but all the major world religions also have traditions and rituals focused on the individual. For instance, the contemplative and mystical traditions within various world religions often emphasize introspection and time for solitude. Rothberg (2006), for example, emphasizes the need for solitude, self-reflection, and contemplation for the most effective social engagement. He is critical of many common ways of being religious in the West, particularly the United States, for having become too focused on individual needs. His call is to bring greater balance, using solitude and reflection to help one become more effectively socially engaged.

Existential approaches also tend to emphasize a way of being in relationships that is meaningful. Many individuals may spend a good deal of time in relationship with others without true engagement in these relationships. Not all types of interaction are equal. Authentic and genuine relationships and interactions are more deeply meaningful than the superficial ways of relating that may distract one from one's deeper loneliness but never help one overcome the pain of being alone. Religion, at its best, helps people to achieve more authentic, genuine, and meaningful relationships.

Human emotions Having emotions is part of being human. Cultures often have very different ways of experiencing and expressing emotion, yet people from all cultures experience emotions. Similar to the discussion of self and relationship in the previous section, culture may play an important role in determining what type of emotional expression is healthy for individuals from that culture (Hoffman and Cleare-Hoffman 2011). It is often counterproductive, and potentially harmful, to force people to conform to certain ways of expressing emotion. This is a common mistake that therapists make, especially when working with people from a different culture than their own. They assume that more open emotional expression is good for all people, and therefore they do not respect cultural and personal differences in dealing with emotions.

Religion, at times, can work in the service of repressing emotions, but can also promote the opposite extreme of excessive emotionality. From an existential perspective, there is no one right way to express and work with emotions. In a clinical setting, clients often enter therapy with very different comfort zones with emotions. The majority of clients struggle with their emotions, which can mean difficulty in emotional regulation (i.e., excessive emotionality) or excessive repression (i.e., avoidance of emotions or inability to recognize emotions). As an existential therapist, I work with clients to help them find their own ways of dealing with emotions. If it is evident that the client is excessively controlling their emotions, this may result

in somatic symptoms (i.e., manifest as physical health problems such as headaches or pain issues, nausea, etc.), depression, or irritability. When it is recognized that a client is having problems because of emotional repression or lack of awareness of their emotions, this does not necessitate teaching clients to emote in some dramatic fashion. Many clients may never speak of their emotions directly but instead speak of them symbolically, through art. Other clients may learn to sit with their emotions and then talk about them rationally but never show many outward signs of the emotions they are feeling. Some clients may learn to be more vocal and assertive in expressing their emotions. There is not a right answer; rather, the therapist and the client work together to find a way the client is able to recognize, experience, and create meaning around the emotions they are experiencing.

Individuals at the other end of the continuum may have difficulty regulating their emotions. They may feel they cannot control their anxiety, anger, or sadness. When clients present with these issues, clinically it becomes important to help the clients learn to contain, but not repress or over-control, their emotions. The successful outcome will look very different from client to client.

When looking at people through an existential lens, it is paramount to remember that each person is an individual and also an individual within a culture. When therapies or religions place rigid criteria upon individuals about the way in which people should identify and express their emotions, they often are ineffective and oppressive. Emotions are important because they provide us with messages about what is occurring within the individual. Furthermore, neuropsychological research has suggested that emotion plays an important role in the development of meaning (i.e., without some emotional arousal, it is more difficult to establish meaning). Religion can play an important role in helping people navigate and integrate their emotional landscape.

Meaning Meaning has already been discussed in association with many of the existential givens. In many ways, meaning is what holds the different possibilities and potentialities when dealing with the givens. When discussing meaning, it is also evident that there are many levels and types of meaning. The primary meaning that existential scholars and therapists are concerned with is *sustaining meaning* (see Hoffman et al. 2009a). Sustaining meaning is a type of meaning with the depth and significance to help one navigate through difficult situations. Nietzsche (1889/1990) states, "If we possess our why of life, we can put up with almost any how" (p. 33).

Meaning systems are generally more powerful and more sustaining if they are shared as part of a group with shared values. This returns to the idea of myth, which was previously discussed as a way of organizing one's meaning system. Part of the power of myth is that it can bring people together. This, too, is what religion can do.

In order for religion to provide a sustaining meaning, it generally must achieve certain requirements. First, it must address the existential givens in a meaningful way. Second, it must be something that the individual can believe in. Third, it must avoid the error of claiming to be more than what it is; it must accept its limitations. Last, it must provide a way to bind people together or to unite people with a shared meaning system.

Conclusion

An existential approach to the psychology of religion brings with it certain biases, as do all psychologies. Yet, this paper has also shown that existential therapy has the potential to be highly adaptable to different cultures. Dyer et al. (2009) point out some of the primary

challenges in applying existential psychology in China, some of which are relevant to an existential approach to the psychology of religion. In particular, some existential scholars have erred on the side of being overly focused on the individual, while others have advocated an approach to dealing with emotions that may not fit with Chinese culture. As the dialogue on existential psychology has advanced in China, this has benefited existential psychology as a whole. Hopefully, this paper reflects the lessons and growth that has occurred. Yet, there continues to be a great need for research on existential psychology, and an existential psychology of religion, in China, as well as continued dialogue.

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