

## Featured Topic: Spirituality



by Suzie Pileggi, IPPA Newsletter Writer ([bio](#))

Ken Pargament, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology at Bowling Green State University and a licensed clinical psychologist. Dr. Pargament is author of the books *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred* and *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice*, and has also co-edited *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, Practice*. He has written over a hundred research articles on spirituality including the recently published chapter on the topic with Annette Mahoney in the just released *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*.

A world-renowned scholar of religion, Dr. Ken Pargament has been at the helm of spirituality research for more than 30 years. He has published extensively on the vital role of religion in coping with stress and trauma and created the *RCOPE* questionnaire, an invaluable measurement tool that has stimulated a great deal of the research in this field. Although a considerable amount of our lives remains beyond our immediate control, Pargament's work shows that through spirituality we can uncover ways to understand and cope with our fundamental humanity and limitations.

Pargament defines spirituality as “the search for the sacred” – enabling us to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. By recognizing the design of the divine more often in the world, and being thankful and in awe of simple joys, like the budding beauty of nature during the advent of Spring, we can transform our lives.

An initially understudied area of positive psychology, spirituality has grown in popularity over the past 15 years. Perhaps, part of the reason for the spike in interest in the field of research can be attributed to many people's shift of focus today from the *material* to that of the *spiritual*, and personal quest for meaning in their lives.

Pargament's research over the past three decades supports spiritual strivings as more highly correlated with measures of well-being than other types of yearnings. Those who “discover the sacred in many spheres of life” enjoy more psychological and physical benefits. According to Pargament, if people take some time to get in touch with what is really sacred to them and “practice the presence of God or the sacred...in the everyday experiences of life,” they will reap the mind/body benefits. Since we are “more likely to invest more of ourselves in the pursuit of things sacred” by discovering the sacred in the ordinary – like in our work, our marriage, and relationships – we may derive deeper and richer meaning and achieve more positive outcomes.

Having just returned from spending nearly a month in India, a country widely known for its contribution to spirituality, I witnessed the seamlessness of the people's practice of spirituality throughout their everyday lives. Rather than being compartmentalized to just one time or place, e.g. one-hour devotional worship on Sundays, spirituality appeared to permeate the various domains of their lives. While collaborating with my Indian friends on an educational mission, I realized that they indeed practiced a “well-integrated” form of spirituality that Pargament described as positively impacting well-being.

Pargament is currently working with his colleagues Annette Mahoney and Al DeMaris at Bowling Green State University on a pioneering Templeton funded longitudinal study of spirituality as it affects 175 pregnant married couples moving through the first year of family life. Do husbands and wives who view their marriage, pregnancy, and parenting through a sacred lens experience greater individual, marital, and family benefits during this time of transitions? This is the key question of the study that is now almost completed. Stay tuned to find out results of his study in the next year or so.

Here are the highlights of my interview with Dr. Pargament on spirituality:

***Suzie Pileggi: What sparked your initial interest in studying spirituality?***



**Ken Pargament (bio):** Like many young psychologists, I went into the field because I was interested in what made people (and me) tick and because I wanted to help make the world a better place. I was disappointed in my clinical training though. I found that the major models of the time – psychodynamic and behavioral – were fundamentally pessimistic. They presented a bleak view of human nature, of people determined by their early childhood experiences or by the exigencies of the environment. How, I wondered, could we possibly help people mired in depression and despair when our theories were so dark and dismal themselves. So, I was fortunate to find a mentor in Forest Tyler, one of the true pioneers of positive psychology, who developed a model of competence that rested on a more proactive, hopeful view of human nature. I also found myself drawn to studying religion and spirituality, not because I was devout myself, but because I found that spiritually oriented people were grappling with the right questions: Why are we here? How should we live our lives? Is there a deeper meaning to it all? Where do we go when we die and is there anything about us that transcends death? These weren't simply intellectual questions, I learned. They were profoundly emotional, for others and for me as well. They captivated me in 1977 when I received my Ph. D. and they continue to captivate me.

***Suzie: How do you define spirituality?***

**Ken:** Mulling over this question, I wore a dirt track in the lawn pacing around the perimeter of my backyard...I define spirituality as a search for the sacred, an ever-evolving process of discovering, holding on to, and when necessary, transforming one's relationship with the sacred. I really like this definition (of course I'm biased) because it reminds us that there is something special about spirituality. The search for the sacred can't be easily reduced to a purely psychological, social, or physical phenomenon. But more than that, this definition opens the doors of spiritual study to many phenomena of interest, traditional and non-traditional.

***Suzie: You mentioned that spirituality is a motivation. Can you elaborate?***

**Ken:** Yes. To my mind, spirituality is first and foremost a motivation and a distinctive motivation at that. It rests on the human yearning for a relationship with something sacred – something transcendent, boundless, and ultimate. The sacred can be understood in terms of a God, higher power, or divinity, but it can also encompass other aspects of life that take on these extraordinary qualities. Marriage, parenting, the environment, work, art, the soul, sports, virtues – all of these things, indeed any aspect of life, can be imbued with spiritual qualities and become sacred.

***Suzie: Does this mean that we can find spirituality in many places besides those of worship?***

**Ken:** Yes. We can find spirituality not only in churches, mosques, and synagogues, but also in loving relationships, in nature, in scientific inquiry, in our jobs, in quilting, or in simple reflection. The study of spirituality bridges heaven and earth.

***Suzie: Beautiful! Based on your research, what is one of the most important findings about spirituality?***

**Ken:** There is power in perceptions of the sacred. Because psychologists are considerably less religious and spiritual than the general public in the United States, they have tended to overlook, underestimate or even discount the significance of spirituality to most people in our country. And yet, when we examine perceptions of the sacred, we find they have powerful implications for health and well-being.

***Suzie: Can you provide an example?***

**Ken:** For instance, in a set of studies (see *J. of Behavioral Medicine*, 2008), Amy Wachholtz and I compared the effectiveness of meditating to secular mantras (e.g., “I am joyful”) and spiritual mantras (e.g., “God is joy”). Now many meditation practitioners have maintained that the nature of a mantra isn’t critical as long as the mantra is meaningful to the individual. Working with a sample of people who suffered from migraine headaches, we found that, in comparison to the secular meditators, those who meditated to a spiritual mantra experienced a strikingly greater decline in the frequency of migraines and in their ability to tolerate pain. The sacred character of the mantra appeared to magnify the beneficial effects of meditation.

**Suzie:** *Wow! I see a great potential in the future to market meditation, rather than medication, for migraines! How about a surprising or counter-intuitive finding about spirituality?*

**Ken:** We often tell people who are going through hard times that crises offer an opportunity for growth. I assumed that this would also be the case for people who struggle with spiritual matters – questions about God, internal conflicts about faith, differences with other people about spiritual issues. Yet, my colleagues and I have conducted literally dozens of studies that show that spiritual struggles are strongly linked to declines in mental health, physical health, and even greater likelihood of dying. On the other hand, a few studies have also shown that spiritual struggles are tied to reports of personal growth. At this point, I think of spiritual struggles as forks in the road to growth or decline. The million-dollar question is what determines whether struggles lead to growth or decline. That’s one of the things we’re working on right now.

**Suzie:** *Is it at this same juncture that some people (like the saints) go beyond spiritual growth and actually experience an epiphany? Is spiritual growth the same thing as an epiphany? If not, what sets epiphany apart?*

**Ken:** There is no single trajectory of spiritual growth. For some people the process is gradual without sharp ups or downs. Others, however, experience moments of powerful spiritual transformation, when they realize that they have been pursuing the wrong goals in life or taking the wrong pathway to get there. They may occur when the individual has “hit bottom” and realized they’re at a dead-end or are heading over a cliff. Or the moment may come during a time of reflection, a walk in the woods, or in a loving interaction. Whenever it occurs, these are life-altering epiphanies, encounters with the “really, real” that are perceived as having a genuine spiritual authority. Although the founding figures in psychology were vitally interested in these kinds of experiences, psychologists neglected them for over 100 years. We are only beginning to learn about the human potential for spiritual transformation.

**Suzie:** *What is the impact of spirituality on happiness and overall well-being/quality of life?*

**Ken:** I can give a simple answer to this one – it depends. I know, don’t shoot me, but it is true. Just as we can’t draw simple conclusions about the value of psychotherapy, medicine, or psychology as a field, we can’t draw simple conclusions about spirituality. Remember, spirituality comes in many shapes and sizes. I have written that whether spirituality is helpful or harmful depends on the degree to which spirituality is well-integrated. By well-integrated, I am referring to a spirituality that offers people a guiding life-enhancing vision, a broad and deep set of pathways capable of traversing life’s hills and valleys, and a discerning approach to the challenging questions and dilemmas that are part and parcel of living. Empirical studies suggest that a well-integrated spirituality is a tremendous resource. Conversely, a poorly integrated spirituality can make our lives and the lives of others pretty miserable.

**Suzie:** *Back to the Indians, who (as I mentioned in my introduction) seem to integrate spirituality into their daily lives. Does this mean that their “well-integrated” spirituality in their daily lives has a positive impact on happiness over westerners’ quick trip to 1-hour Sunday mass?*

**Ken:** Unfortunately, many people experience shallow and narrow forms of spirituality today – something equivalent to fast food. God is seen as a “Heavenly Bosom” who insures that people will never experience pain or suffering. Religious practice is something to be endured rather than celebrated. Beliefs in compassion, generosity, and self-sacrifice are fine as long as they don’t cause too much

inconvenience. Certainly, we have plenty of poorly integrated spirituality in the United States, but I suspect we can find examples of the same in virtually every country and religious tradition. And, I know we can find exemplars of spiritual integration in every country and tradition as well.

**Suzie: *Are there cultural differences when it comes to spirituality?***

**Ken:** This is one of the questions that is wide open for further study. Much of what we know about spirituality comes from investigations conducted in the west on people who represent Western traditions, including Western forms of Buddhism. But it is clear that other traditions have their own distinctive resources, such as more ecological forms of spirituality in Europe and beliefs in karma among Hindus and Buddhists. It is exciting to see our field now rapidly expanding to encompass other cultures and traditions. For instance, there are now two journals of religion and psychology that have an international focus (*Mental Health, Religion and Culture; The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*).

**Suzie: *Any life changing events (e.g. pregnancy, childbirth, death of a loved-one, etc.) that are catalysts for spirituality?***

**Ken:** It's pretty clear that critical life events impact people not only psychologically, socially, and physically but spiritually as well. While the old saying that there are no atheists in foxholes isn't wholly accurate (we can find atheists before, during, and after combat), spirituality does appear to come to the fore in life's most pivotal times. And our research has shown that spirituality is one of the most commonly accessed resources in stressful times and one of the most helpful resources as well. While many of our other coping resources help people maximize their own control and power, spiritual resources are particularly well-suited to helping people come to terms with the limits of their own control and power, and accept their own frailties and finitude with hope, grace, and even gratitude. As a result of this process, people often report that their most difficult life experiences have, in fact, been powerful forces for spiritual growth.

**Suzie: *Can people increase their spirituality?***

**Ken:** Yes, they can. My colleagues and I are now quite interested in building on the recent scientific advances in the field and moving from research to practice. We have begun to develop and evaluate a variety of spiritually integrated interventions that help people access and nurture their spiritual resources.

**Suzie: *Can you provide an example of a specific intervention?***

**Ken:** For instance, in one intervention for people dealing with social anxiety, participants were taught to see the sacred in a variety of aspects of life, such as work, relationships, nature, and time. The intervention itself drew on a variety of practices – meditation, discussion, ritual, modeling, and education. As in a Gestalt figure-ground picture, we tried to help participants (1) see the sacred (the background in a figure of life dominated by social anxiety) and (2) move the sacred from the background to the foreground of their lives. Preliminary results of this work were promising. Although many of our interventions have been designed to assist people dealing with health-related problems (e.g., HIV/AIDS, cancer, heart disease, bitterness toward an ex-spouse), this work can be extended to the more general population.

**Suzie: *Terrific! What are some overall tips you can offer readers on how to increase the spirituality in their daily lives?***

**Ken:** Unfortunately, I don't have a simple cookbook of recipes to offer here...I am suspicious of easy answers when it comes to spiritual development (or any kind of effort to enhance our well-being). But here are just a few suggestions to foster a more integrated spirituality. Not surprisingly, they take the form of questions (I am after all a clinical psychologist).

- What do you hold sacred? Do some soul-searching. Identify what it is that matters most deeply to you in your life. Ask yourself how much time you are devoting to your spiritual strivings every day. Consider how you might find more time in your everyday life for the pursuit of the sacred.
- Where do you find the sacred? Remember that there are many spiritual pathways. Some of us find the sacred in relationships. Others find it in prayer, meditation or contemplation. Still others find the sacred through study. And others through action. Reflect on where you experience your deepest feelings of wonder, awe, gratitude, mystery, timelessness, and love? Emotions such as these provide important clues about where you might find the sacred, and where you might try to spend more of your time.
- What kind of commitment can you make to spiritual growth? Practice makes perfect in the spiritual realm as in other areas of life. The word “discipline” is deeply rooted in religious and spiritual traditions because they recognize that repetition is needed to master those practices that bring the individual closer to a spiritual ideal. The point here is that spiritual growth takes commitment and hard work. So prepare yourself for a long-term process and don't be discouraged by frustrations along the way. The concluding sentence in Andrew Boyd's wonderfully wise book entitled, “Daily Afflictions,” is “I am One with the Universe, and it hurts.

**Suzie: *Where do you see the future of spirituality research going?***

**Ken:** To my mind, the growth in our field is just one more reflection of what I noted earlier, the human yearning for a connection with something far greater than ourselves – psychologists and other professionals are also motivated to seek out the sacred. I don't think this is simply a fad. In the future, I believe, we will see researchers get closer to spiritual experience. We will leave the safety of our offices, study the spiritual beliefs and practices of people more directly, develop more precise concepts and measures of spirituality, and examine the rich variety of sacred goals and sacred pathways toward these destinations. Maybe the highest priority is to develop a deeper understanding of the spiritual world views and practices of people from non-Western cultures and traditions. With this knowledge in hand, I believe we will be far better equipped to grapple with our most vexing problems and do what we originally hoped to do when we entered the field – make the world a better place.

**Recommended Readings:**

- Pargament, K. I. (2007). *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*. New York: Guilford Press.
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