Spirituality in Resilience Processes in International Contexts: An Introduction

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This special issue was prompted by several converging social and scholarly trends: a perceived rise in the frequency and severity of disasters, a call for more studies of the role of spirituality in disasters, a commitment to research on non-U.S. populations, and a recognition of the need for more sophisticated understandings of resilience processes.

First, there has been a sharp increase of community-level disasters in the past decade with three of the most economically devastating natural disasters occurring in the past 8 years and approximately 5,000 terrorist attacks per year occurring over the past 10 years (Aten & Boan, 2016). The recent surge in refugee populations fleeing from war-inflicted disasters has garnered daily public attention on social media and traditional news sources. The overwhelming demands of these disasters necessitate multi-level theory and interventions to mitigate, manage, and recover from their complex effects.

Second, research in the psychology of spirituality and religion has boomed in the last few decades; simultaneously, studies of spirituality and trauma are on the rise. However, scholarship on resilience during disasters within the psychology of spirituality and religion lags behind other fields of research. This seems like a misstep as coping during disaster has been viewed by many as intertwined with spirituality due to its inherent meaning-making nature (Orton & O'Grady, in press; Park, 2010). Four years ago, Walker and Aten (2012) co-edited a special issue in the *Journal of Psychology & Theology* on trauma and spirituality. In it, they called for future research addressing disasters and spirituality:

> Overall, we need more collaborative research, or researchers, that are capable of bringing together the best of disaster mental health and psychology of religion researchers if we are going to more fully capture the complexity of psychology of religion and disaster phenomena. (p. 351)

The current special issue is an attempt to respond to the call for more sophisticated considerations of spirituality in resilience processes during disasters.

Third, although the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* is a U.S.-based journal, the cosmologies of those with whom its readers work is increasingly more diverse. It is no longer uncommon for practitioners to work with first- and second-generation immigrants whose nations of origin differ dramatically from that of the practitioner. Consistent with this trend is the growing recognition of the untenable assumption that Western-based theory and research is universally applicable (Arnett, 2008; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

Finally, the special issue explicitly refers to resilience in terms of processes rather than variance. Early research on resilience focused on resilience as a trait (i.e., hardiness) to be investigated as an outcome variable. In general, the field of psychology defaults to variance-based research; however, notable scholars have pointed out that variance-based studies are seldom replicable (Maxwell, Lau, & Howard, 2015) and often fail to capture the lived experience of participants and clients (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015). Understanding and fostering multi-level resilience across complex contexts requires exploration of processes.
In response to these four needs, the 2015 call for papers for a special issue on spirituality in resilience processes across international contexts was intended to attract cross-disciplinary and multi-level investigations of resilience processes during adverse life events, or “cosmology episodes,” across diverse contexts. Specifically, the call was for empirical or theoretical articles that addressed spirituality and religion in resilience processes at the individual, team, organizational, community, and/or national level with preference for manuscripts that focused on international populations.

We were largely successful in attracting scholarship within these criteria. All of the articles considered spirituality, resilience, and international populations. Four articles reported findings from original research (two qualitative and two quantitative), and one article was theoretical. Four of the five articles were written at U.S. institutions, and one was written from a scholar affiliated with an academic institution in China. Although not as cross-disciplinary as we had originally hoped, there was some diversity in academic focus and level of analysis within the articles. An article on care teams was written by scholars in a counseling department. Another article was written by a faculty member in a sociology department focused on community-level resilience through the lenses of anthropology and community psychology. Another article on multi-level resilience was co-authored by a scholar of pastoral counseling and a scholar of management. The remaining two articles were written by scholars in psychology departments, with one article attending to individual level national security concerns and national-level resilience, and the other addressing resilience from a public health orientation.

The five articles that constitute the core of this special issue serve collectively as a microcosm of the future of research on large-scale, potentially-traumatic events. Van Tongeren and colleagues contributed an article on feelings of threat regarding the Ebola virus within the United States in September-October 2014 that exemplifies a traditional uni-national research model; it is a careful study of a nation deciding whether to embody the spiritual ideal of protecting its co-religionists from external dangers or the spiritual ideal of aiding strangers in need. Worthington and colleagues conducted a theoretical analysis of literature on the centrality of forgiveness processes in the construction of resilience in a wide variety of international catastrophes. Three additional articles provided rich examples of resilience processes in the Haiti earthquake of 2010 (O’Grady and Orton), the Yushu China earthquake of 2010 (Ting), and the ongoing Romanian refugee crisis (Newmeyer and colleagues).

While I was writing this introduction to the special issue, the world experienced a significant terrorist attack in Brussels, Belgium; deadly earthquakes in Japan and Ecuador; a continuing refugee crisis from Northern Africa and the Middle East through Eastern and Western Europe; and intractable, long-term violence in Iraq and Afghanistan. And, certainly, between today and the point at which readers engage with the articles in this special issue, more large-scale, potentially-traumatic events will emerge around our small planet. The question that I would like us to keep in mind as we study the five articles that constitute this special issue is the following: What role will the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality play in generating the multi-level, diversity-minded, process-focused, cross-disciplinary, and evidence-based theories necessary to address the complexity of suffering, and to increase the amount of resilience in, our precarious but beautiful world?

References
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