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**Sacred Matters:
Sanctification as a Vital Topic for the Psychology of Religion**

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Abstract

In this paper and those that follow we suggest that sacred matters represent a vital interest for the psychology of religion. We note that people can perceive virtually any aspect of their lives as having spiritual character and significance. Furthermore, people can sanctify objects theistically as a manifestation of their images, beliefs, or experiences of God and nontheistically by investing objects with qualities that characterize divinity. We discuss several implications of sanctification for human functioning: people invest a great deal of time and energy into sacred matters; people go to great lengths to preserve and protect whatever they perceive to be sacred; sacred aspects of life elicit spiritual emotions; sanctification offers a powerful personal and social resource that people can tap throughout their lives; and the loss of the sacred can have devastating effects. We conclude with a call for further studies of sacred matters and specific directions for research.

Sacred Matters:

Sanctification as a Vital Topic for the Psychology of Religion

- * A victim trapped in the wreckage of a plane crash holds tightly to a crucifix around her neck. She says only one thing to her rescuer: “Whatever I do, I’m not letting go of this” (“Here I was . . .”, 1989, p. 30).
- * A visit by the former defense minister and current prime minister of Israel to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is followed by widespread violence between Israelis and Palestinians.
- * A mother of two young children comments: “To see my kids is to realize that they are -- well, godlike . . . not because they are particularly unusual children, but because I could not with my own two hands have created anything as wonderful or amazing as they are . . . Just tickling their feet and hearing them giggle -- that’s cosmic, that’s divine” (Fitzpatrick, 1991, p. 2).
- * The grandfather of two children killed in the Oklahoma City bombing says: “A year ago this week, Satan drove up 5th Street in a Ryder truck. He blew my babies up. He may have looked like a normal man, but he was Satan” (Newsweek, 1996, p. 19).

What do these different phenomena have in common? Each has something to do with a sacred aspect of life, be it the sacred object that serves as a life preserver to the victim of a plane crash, the violence that results when perceptions of sacred space clash, the mother who sees something divine-like in her children, or the man who defines the Oklahoma City bombing as satanic, the antithesis of the sacred. In each of these vignettes, sacred matters are interwoven into the fabric of life experience and, in the process, the experience takes on a special character. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. Phenomena such as these should be of keen interest to the psychology of religion. Surprisingly, they have not received a great deal of attention. Perhaps because these phenomena do not speak directly to conceptions of God, to institutional religious involvement, or to general religious orientations, or perhaps because the sacred may be hard to

discern in the midst of these experiences, they have fallen largely outside the mainstream of research and theory in our discipline.

In this paper and the papers that follow, we will suggest that the psychology of religion should be very much interested in sacred aspects of life, with how they become sacred, with how they remain sacred, with how they change, and with their implications for individual and social behavior. We will suggest that the study of sacred matters opens the psychology of religion to phenomena of interest that include the usual as well as the unusual experiences of living, and to a population of interest that includes nontheists as well as theists. And we will generate a number of questions that may stimulate further explorations into this relatively uncharted area of study.

This paper, in particular, will define sacred phenomena as central to the meaning of religion and spirituality. We will consider how people “make sacred;” that is, how they come to sanctify objects or perceive aspects of their lives having spiritual character and significance. We will propose that this process of sanctification has several implications for human functioning: people invest a great deal of their time and energy into sacred matters; people go to great lengths to preserve and protect whatever they perceive to be sacred; sacred aspects of life are likely to elicit spiritual emotions of attraction (e.g., love, adoration, gratitude) and trepidation (e.g., awe, fear, humility); the sacred represents a powerful personal and social resource that people can tap throughout their lives; and the loss of the sacred can have devastating effects. We will conclude this paper with a call for further studies of sacred matters and specific directions for research. The papers that follow will illustrate some of the initial and promising findings that are emerging from this area of theory and research. We begin with a definition.

Definitions: Religion and Sacred Matters

Religion is defined here as a “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament, 1997, p. 34). There are two key concepts in this definition: the search for significance and the sacred. Underlying this definition is the assumption that people are proactive, goal-directed beings searching for whatever they hold to be of value in life. Every search consists of a pathway and a destination. Pathways are made up of beliefs, practices,

relationships, and experiences that lead individuals toward their goals of greatest value. Destinations refer to significance itself. Significance is both subjective and objective. Subjectively, significance involves the sense of satisfaction, value, and importance that accompanies the pursuit and attainment of goals. Objectively, significance refers to the goals or objectives that people strive for in living. People may pursue objectives that have psychological (e.g., a sense of power), social (e.g., intimacy with others), physical (e.g., health), material (e.g., a nice house), and, as we will see, spiritual characteristics. These objects vary in their social value, and include the good (e.g., commitment to a better world) and the bad (e.g., addiction to drugs). The choice of significant objects is by no means trivial. Characteristics of the goals people seek in life, research shows, have important implications for their well-being (see Emmons, 1999).

There are many possible pathways and destinations in living. Not all of them are religious. What makes religion distinctive is the involvement of a sacred dimension in the search for significance. Although there are many kinds of religions, they share a concern with things sacred. As Paden (1992) put it, the sacred is the “common denominator of all religious life” (p. 73). According to the Oxford Dictionary, the term “sacred” refers to the holy, those things that are “set apart” from the ordinary and deserving of veneration and respect. The core of the sacred consists of concepts of God, the divine, and transcendence. However, sacred matters extend beyond perceptions of these fundamental spiritual constructs; they also encompass any object that takes on extraordinary character by virtue of its association with, or representation of, divinity (Pargament, 1999). Durkheim (1915) wrote: “By sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything can be sacred” (p. 52). Several classes of objects can be viewed, represented, or experienced as sacred: material objects (crucifix, drugs), time and space (the Sabbath, churches), events and transitions (Bar Mitzvah, death), cultural products (music, literature), people (saints, cult leaders), psychological attributes (the self, meaning), social attributes (caste, patriotism), and roles (marriage, parenting, work). Thus, sacred aspects

of life can take on a virtually limitless number of forms.

In fact, differences in the ways sacred matters are understood and experienced provide a referent for distinguishing among the world's religions and defining the identities of their members (Paden, 1988). Differences in sacred perceptions also contribute to the distinctiveness of each individual's search for significance. For example, the mother in one of the initial vignettes experiences a connection with the divine through her daily encounters with her children. The victim of the plane crash clutches her crucifix for comfort and security while awaiting her rescue. One man practices yoga and vegetarianism in the search for spiritual as well as psychological and social well-being. Yet another senses a higher divine purpose at work beneath even the most baffling of events.

But no matter its particular expression, sacred matters lie at the heart of religion. The search for what is sacred -- the process of discovering, conserving, and when necessary, transforming what is sacred in one's life -- is the central and primary function of religion (Pargament, 1999). Thus, the role of a sacred dimension in the search for significance should not be underestimated. To the religious mind, it is the world of the sacred that is "really, real" (Geertz, 1966). This is the world the religiously-minded seeks to discover, conserve, and, at times, re-discover. Eliade (1957) summarized it nicely: "Religious man can live only in a sacred world, because it is only in such a world that he participates in being, that he has a real existence" (p. 64). We turn now to a key question: How do people come to perceive that certain aspects of their lives have a sacred character? To answer this question, we must consider a critical but neglected construct in the psychology of religion -- sanctification.

Sanctification: The Discovery of What is Sacred

From the outset, it is important to articulate the way in which we are using the term "sanctification" in this paper. The term has specific theological meanings that vary across different religious traditions (e.g., Dieter et al., 1987; Miethe, 1988; Turner, 1982). For example, from a Christian theological vantage point, sanctification is an inherently mysterious process through which objects are transformed by God's actions from profane into sacred entities. In this

vein, the sacrament of marriage is said to transform a heterosexual relationship into an indissoluble holy union in the eyes of the Catholic and many other Christian churches. Our approach here, however, is not theological. We define sanctification as a process through which seemingly secular aspects of life are perceived as having spiritual character and significance (Mahoney, Pargament, Scott, Jewell, Swank, Emery, Hipp, Rye, & Butter, 1997; Mahoney & Pargament, in press; Pargament, 1999). As used here, sanctification is a “psychospiritual” construct. It is spiritual because of its point of reference sacred matters. It is psychological in two ways; first, it focus on a perception of what is sacred. Second, the methods for studying sacred matters are social scientific rather than theological in nature.

Clearly, many people perceive sacred phenomena as forces which have, in essence, come to them. They experience the invisible made visible, a light shed on a dark mystery, a revelation of the divine. Similarly, Eliade (1957) speaks of the sacred revealing itself to people through a particular kind of experience, a “hierophany” in which the sacred dimension “erupts” into the world. Others, however, perceive sacred matters as something they themselves have had a hand in finding and nurturing. In this vein, Eliade (1957) goes on to note that “by reactualizing sacred history, by imitating divine behavior, man puts and keeps himself close to the gods -- that is, in the real and the significant” (p. 202). Does the origin of what is sacred lie in God or in the human mind? This question falls outside the scope of psychology. From a psychological perspective, we cannot determine whether God “makes sacred” or people do. Nevertheless, even though we cannot answer this ultimate theological question, we can examine peoples’ perceptions of what is sacred, both “encountered” and “constructed” (Paden, 1988). And as we will see, a focus on sanctification leads to a number of interesting and potentially answerable questions for the psychology of religion. There are two ways in which objects may be perceived as having spiritual character and significance.

Theistic Sanctification

Most directly, an object can be experienced as a manifestation of one’s images, beliefs, or experience of God. Through religious readings, education, and ritual, adherents to a wide

range of traditions are taught that God's powers are manifest in many aspects of life. In religious services, Jews regularly recite the blessing: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! The whole earth is full of His glory" (Donin, 1980, p. 122). Jews are expected to share in the holiness of God by following His laws (Leviticus 19:2). These laws wrap virtually every aspect of life within a sacred shroud, and by adhering to the commandments the individual elevates him/herself from the animal-like to the God-like. Within Judaism, God is said to be present in human actions:

The Jewish way of living is an answer to a supreme human problem; namely: how must man, a being who is in essence the likeness of God, think, feel, and act? How can he live in a way compatible with the presence of God? . . . All mitzvot [good deeds] are means of evoking in us the awareness of living in the neighborhood of God, of living in the holy dimension. . . Every act of man is an encounter of the human and the holy. (Heschel, 1986, p. 273)

Within the Koran, Muslims find references to Allah's sovereignty in all of nature:

Verily in the creation of the heavens and the earth,
and the alternation of night and day;
and in the ships that move through the sea with
 what is useful to man,
and in the rain which Allah sendeth down from heaven,
to give life to earth that is dead
and to spread over its kind of animals;
and in the change of winds,
and in the clouds freely serving between heaven and
 earth;
-- in all these are signs for those who understand (2:159)

From the Upanishads, the scriptures concerned with the knowledge of God, Hindus learn that God dwells in the visible and the invisible:

Filled with Brahman are the things we see,
Filled with Brahman are the things we see not,
From out of Brahman floweth all that is:
From Brahman all -- yet is he still the same.

(Upanishads, 1957, p. 80)

Among Christians, Jesus is the ultimate symbol of the incarnation of the sacred in earthly human life (“though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” --- Philippians 2:6-7). Further, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, each believer’s life and actions can reflect the presence of God:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. 1

Corinthians 12: 4-11

In addition, the Christian church has had a long tradition of sacraments that provide a “meeting

point” between the sacred and the human. For example, the ritual of baptism re-enacts God’s blessing of Jesus where the individual is recognized as a beloved “child of God” imbued with the Holy Spirit.

In sum, the God of most religious traditions is not removed from the workings of the world. The divine is said to be concerned with earthly as well as heavenly matters. Furthermore, the religions of the world encourage their members to see God as manifest in their lives. As we will see shortly, they also encourage their adherents to sanctify particular dimensions of their lives.

Nontheistic Sanctification

The process of sanctification is not limited to theistically oriented interpretations of various aspects of life. Sanctification can also occur indirectly; perceptions of spiritual character and significance can develop by investing objects with qualities that are associated with the divine. These sacred qualities include attributes of transcendence (e.g., holy, heavenly), ultimate value and purpose (e.g., blessed, inspiring), and timelessness (e.g., everlasting, miraculous). Individuals could conceivably attribute sacred qualities such as these to significant objects though they may not espouse beliefs in a God or higher power.

Indicators of this indirect form of sanctification are commonplace in our culture. Sacred adjectives are often linked to ostensibly secular objects. People speak of a sacred trust, holy wars, saintly figures, the holy land, hero worship, God-given rights, hallowed ground, and so on. Listen to how one woman, serving a life sentence in prison, came to invest one old chair with sacred character:

With persistence and hard work I managed to get the chair sanded down, stained, and nailed back together. Restoring the chair was the beginning of the long, slow process of putting my life back together. . . It is difficult for me to describe the comfort and security my chair has brought me. Because of all the times I have prayed or meditated in it, it

has become a sacred object. Throughout the years and all the changes they have brought, it is the one thing that has remained the same (Becker, 1998, p. 34).

As this example suggests, virtually any object can be perceived as spiritual in character. One person perceives a sacred value in the act of eating: “Recovering the deeper meaning of eating could help cure our spiritual anorexia. From it we can learn the essential unity of body and soul, and we can relearn the true relations to the formed world that the hungering soul makes possible. . . Understanding more clearly what it means to nourish the hungry soul, we might be better able to satisfy it” (Kass, 1994, p. 231). Another sees time as sacred: “We are on earth for a finite time. Every day is blessed, and I want to live that day fully. . . the sacred moment provides a stopping place, a listening post, where the preciousness of immediate experience and living-in-the-now unite” (Lynn, 1999). Still another, views the act of quilting in terms of sacred qualities: “Slowly, I have come to understand that quilting for me is about worship. . . One aspect of worship is transformation, transforming the ordinary into the Sacred, the remnant into the Holy. . . Quilting as spiritual discipline is entering the sensual richness of the universe, creating order out of chaos, beauty out of the simple, wholeness from the scraps and in the midst, being transformed” (Bushbaum, 1999, p. 236). Note that none of the individuals above explicitly links their particular object with God or a specific faith tradition. Nevertheless, the objects are imbued with qualities often associated with the divine (e.g., prayer, soul, blessing, spirituality, worship).

Of course, sanctification may occur both directly and indirectly; that is, aspects of life may be perceived both as manifestations of God and as embodiments of divine or transcendent qualities. Listen, for example, how Buechner (1987) sanctifies life as a whole, perceiving the divine both directly and indirectly in all of experience.

I discovered that if you really kept your eyes peeled to it and your ears open. . . even such a limiting life as the one I was living on Rupert Mountain opened into extraordinary vistas . .

.There is no event so commonplace but that God is present with it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly . . . Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and in the pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch and taste your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace. (Buechner, 1987, p. 87).

These examples of sanctification, theistic and nontheistic, also hint at an important point: people differ in the aspects of life they hold sacred. These differences may be tied in part to an individual's particular religious identification. After all, members of religious traditions are taught to confer sacred status on different figures, present and past. They are also taught to sanctify other objects differently, such as physical objects, be they the sacred mountains of some Native American traditions, the idols and statues of Hinduism and Buddhism, or the various holy sites of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Within pluralistic, individualistic cultures we would expect important differences in sanctification among people more generally, irrespective of their religious affiliations. For example, in their study of a representative sample of 150 community members, Mahoney et al. (this issue) asked adults (ages 25-56) to generate their personal strivings and measured the degree to which each of these strivings was sanctified. Although some types of strivings were more sanctified than others, participants perceived a wide array of strivings as being sacred, including the family (e.g., working at marriage), self-development (e.g., learning), work and money (e.g., being successful at work), physical health (e.g., exercising), and existential concerns (e.g., inner peace).

As yet, it is unclear how people come to perceive particular objects as sacred. Religious institutions are certainly one key source of education about sanctification, but they are not the

only source. Families, organizations, communities, and the larger culture as a whole define what is and what is not sacred, what is to be revered and what is not. And individuals bring their own history of experiences, habits, temperaments, and preferences that are likely to shape the form and intensity of what they sanctify. Thus, an individual's perception of what is sacred may emerge out of a rich constellation of personal, social, and situational forces. In this vein, Doehring and Clarke (2002) surveyed a national random sample and found that perceptions of sacredness in life were predicted by a diverse set of variables: religious (e.g., intrinsic religiousness, mysticism, worship attendance, prayer), psychological (e.g., purpose in life, self-esteem, secure attachment, low narcissism, low commitment to empiricism), social (e.g., community service attitude, social and community helping), and situational (e.g., everyday pleasant events).

Let's reiterate the key points. First, sanctification is defined in this paper as the perception of an aspect of life as having spiritual character and significance. Sanctification occurs when an individual either: a) perceives an object to be a direct manifestation of one's images, beliefs, or experiences of God, and/or b) attributes qualities to an object that are typically associated with the divine. Second, as we have defined it, sanctification is a process of potential relevance not only to theists but to nontheists as well. As Eliade (1957) suggested: "Something of the religious conception of the world still persists in the behavior of profane man, although he is not always conscious of this immemorial heritage" (p. 50). Third, both theists and nontheists may vary in those aspects of life they hold sacred. Finally, it is critically important to recognize that this conceptualization of sanctification focuses on individuals' perceptions of objects and these perceptions can be examined by scientific methods. Questionnaires can be developed which measure the degree to which people directly and indirectly perceive a particular object as sanctified (e.g., Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, in press). Likewise, the antecedents and consequences of perceives objects as sacred can be examined.

Implications of Sanctification

Whether the process is direct or indirect, sanctification has a number of important

implications.

Investing in Sacred Matters

First, people are likely to invest more of themselves in the pursuit and care of those things that are sacred to them than in the search for other ends. William Paden (1992) writes: “Sacred things are so because of the immense role they play and the absolute priority they have in someone’s world” (p. 73). In relationship to the holy, he goes on to note, humans act differently. For example, in one study of employees with a wide range of occupations, those who defined their work as a “calling” reported missing fewer days of work than those who defined their work as a job or career (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Similarly, in the study of strivings, Mahoney et al. (this issue) made several phone calls to their participants, asking them how they had spent their time and energy over the previous 24 hours. People spent more time thinking about and interacting with others around their more highly sanctified strivings than their less sanctified strivings. Those individuals who sanctified their strivings also reported significantly greater commitment to and importance of the strivings, greater likelihood of success, and plans to pursue the strivings over a longer period of time. Studying three nationally representative samples of groups affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, Tarakeshwar et al. (in press) found that those who sanctified the environment were more likely to invest personal funds in environmental causes. Similarly, Mahoney et al. (this issue) reported that college students who sanctified their bodies to a greater extent placed a higher priority on physical fitness as an everyday part of life, engaged in more vigorous physical exercise, and ate more sensibly.

Protecting and Preserving the Sacred

Second, people are likely to try harder to preserve and protect sanctified aspects of life that have been threatened. Berkovits (1979) poignantly describes the lengths many Jews went to in order to preserve their sacred identity in the Holocaust. One mother, interrupted by Gestapo agents in the midst of the ritual circumcision of her newborn son, shouted: “Hurry up! Circumcise the child. Don’t you see? They have come to kill us. At least let my child die as a Jew” (p. 45). Sanctified objects are often “wrapped in don’t touch sentiments” (Mol, 1974, p.

98). For example, Chidester (1988) describes how residents of the state of Delaware refused to accept the bodies of the people killed at Jonestown for burial. Many residents wrote letters to the state and federal government expressing their fear that the bodies of the Jonestown dead would defile sacred American soil. American citizens have voiced similar sentiments about the burial of the remains of the perpetrators of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Social sanctions may also be invoked to protect against sacred violations, as illustrated by attempts to pass an amendment against the desecration of the American flag. Finally, many people may draw on their religious and spiritual resources and methods of coping (e.g., spiritual support, purification rituals, religious reframing, forgiveness) in their efforts to conserve what is sacred in their lives (Pargament, 1997).

Empirical investigations provide some support for the idea that people preserve and protect aspects of life they hold sacred. In a study of a representative sample of 97 married couples in the community, Mahoney et al. (1999) found that husbands and wives who sanctified their marriages appeared to be more protective of their relationships; in response to conflict, they reported more collaborative problem solving, less verbal aggression towards each other, less marital conflict, and less stalemating. Swank, Mahoney, and Pargament (2000) examined the degree to which a community sample of parents, sanctified the role of parenting. Higher levels of sanctification of parenting were tied to lower levels of verbal aggression to their children and reports of more consistent parenting behavior. In their study of Presbyterian Church groups, Tarakeshwar et al. (in press) found that individuals who sanctified the environment to a greater degree were also more likely to hold pro-environmental beliefs and, for two of the samples, engage in environmentally protective behaviors. Mahoney et al. (this issue) reported that college students who perceived their bodies to be more sacred engaged in more health-protective behaviors, including wearing a seat-belt, getting enough sleep, avoiding overworking, and lower levels of alcohol use and cigarette smoking.

Eliciting Spiritual Emotions

Third, perceptions of aspects of life as sacred are likely to elicit spiritual emotions. Otto

(1917) described the complex feelings that accompany the idea of the divine as a “numinous consciousness,” a nonrational experience that is difficult to put into words. Numinous consciousness, he believed, contains a polarity of feelings. There is, on the one hand, a sense of fascination that attracts the individual to the sanctified object (*mysterium fascinans*) and elicits feelings of love, adoration, and gratitude. On the other hand, there is a sense of awfulness and majesty that repels the individual from the object (*mysterium tremendum*) and elicits feelings of awe, fear, and humility in relationship to what is seen as Wholly Other, something that lies beyond our ordinary comprehension. Perceptions of sacredness may also engender emotions of responsibility, duty, obligation, and protectiveness.

Unfortunately, relatively little attention has been paid to the affective dimension of religious experience (see Hood, 1995). However, researchers are beginning to focus on a variety of emotions that are deeply rooted in religion and spirituality, including gratitude (e.g., Emmons & Crumpler, 2000), humility (e.g., Tangney, 2000), love (e.g., Levin, 2000), and felt obligation (Stein, 1992). We suspect that spiritual emotions such as these are likely to be prominent when people perceive sacredness in various elements of their lives.

Drawing on Sacred Resources

Fourth, people are likely to derive greater satisfaction and well-being from the pursuit and experience of what is sacred to them. Moreover, sanctified objects are likely to serve as resources that people can draw on for strength and support in their lives. Working from an object relations perspective, LaMothe (1998) suggests that sacred objects can be viewed as transitional objects. Unlike transitional objects in children, however, sacred objects in adults are more than subjective; they are often socially shared or intersubjective. Noting that personal and social narratives are woven around these “vital objects,” LaMothe believes that they represent “shared attitudes, practices, hopes, expectations, and aspirations as well as personal and social wishes” (p. 165). Sacred objects then are resources that have the capacity to: (1) provide a sense of personal identity, continuity, and cohesion; (2) soothe and comfort individuals and communities in times of stress, and; (3) help link the present with loved ones from the past and

hopes for loved ones in the future.

A few empirical investigations offer some support for these assertions. Emmons, Cheung, and Tehrani (1998) asked a community sample to describe their personal strivings; that is, “the things that you typically or characteristically are trying to do in your everyday behavior” (p. 9). Some people reported sanctified goals or “spiritual strivings,” such as “trying to discern and follow God’s will,” “teach my children spiritual truths,” and “bring my life in line with my beliefs.” Those who described more spiritual strivings also reported greater purpose in life, greater subjective well-being, greater coherence among their goals, and less goal conflict. Similarly, in their study of married couples, Mahoney et al. (1999) found that sanctification was strongly linked to greater global marital satisfaction and more personal benefits from marriage. In a study of memorable dreams of college students and community members, dreams that were perceived as more sacred were associated with reports of greater positive affect and stress-related and spiritual growth (Phillips, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2000). Murray, Pargament, and Mahoney (this issue) found that college women and men who sanctified the act of sexual intercourse experienced greater pleasure and satisfaction from the sexual act. Mahoney et al. (this issue) found that college students who sanctified their bodies indicated more subjective satisfaction with their physical appearance and body composition as well as greater self-confidence in controlling urges to overeat. Finally, in their community study, Mahoney et al. (this issue) reported that strivings that were more sanctified were perceived as significantly more meaningful to life. Furthermore, the participants indicated that they experienced more support from family, friends, and God, and greater joy and happiness in the pursuit of more sanctified strivings.

Suffering the Loss and Violation of the Sacred

Finally, it is important to note that people may suffer severe consequences when sanctified aspects of their lives are harmed or lost. Some of the strongest words in the religious lexicon are assigned to violations of the sacred: abomination, desecration, pollution, profanation. Within many religious traditions, the stiffest of penalties have been reserved for spiritual transgressions,

from shunning and excommunication to stoning and execution. In his biography of the Indian mathematician Ramanujan, Kanigel (1991) notes how travel outside India represented a form of spiritual pollution for Orthodox Hindus at the turn of the century. “That meant your friends and relatives would not have you to their homes. You could find no bride or bridegroom for your child. Your married daughter couldn’t visit you without herself risking excommunication. . . . You couldn’t even get the help of a fellow casteman for the funeral of a family member. Here was the grim, day-to-day meaning of the word *outside*” (p. 185). Well aware of the importance of sanctified objects to personal and social identity and cohesion, combative groups have at times tried to destroy their opponent’s most sacred possessions. During the Holocaust, the Nazis attempted to destroy not only Jewish lives, but all vestiges of Jewish culture: “Death camps were not only literal death camps but they were also death camps in that there were no vital-sacred objects and hence no life, only existence and necessity. Intentional creation of reality to obliterate what is ‘fundamental to human vitality’ by forced removal of sacred objects and practices” (LaMothe, 1998, p. 167). Violations of the sacred, intentional or unintentional, create powerful effects. History has been punctuated by violence and conflict following the desecration of a sacred object; witness the recent furor that arose in Afghanistan when the radical Islamic regime destroyed ancient Buddhist statues.

The topic of desecration has received relatively little research attention, with some notable exceptions (Doehring, 1993). Magyar, Pargament, and Mahoney (2000) examined the implications of desecration in a sample of college students who had been recently hurt in a romantic relationship. Consistent with predictions, students who perceived their hurt or betrayal as a violation of a sacred relationship (i.e., desecration) reported more negative affect, physical health symptoms, poorer mental health, and interestingly more personal and spiritual growth. Desecration represented something more than a negative life event. Desecration continued to predict various outcomes even after controlling for the perceived negativity of the event, as well as the global religiousness of the individual. These findings were largely replicated in a study of community residents who had experienced a spiritual loss or violation in the past two years

(Magyar et al., 2002).

Mahoney, Pargament et al. (2002) also examined reactions of college students in the midwest and New York City to the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Those who reported higher levels of desecration in connection with the attacks also indicated higher levels of anxiety and depression as well as stronger approval of extreme forms of revenge against the terrorists. Desecration also related to greater personal and spiritual growth as well as feelings of national solidarity and support of the government. Thus, interpreting negative events as a violation of the sacred may have distinctive implications for health and well-being. Desecration appears to trigger greater personal suffering, while also facilitating social bonding and solidifying people's determination to retaliate against the aggressors.

In sum, the process of sanctification may have profound significance for some key dimensions of human functioning. Initial theory and evidence suggests that sanctification is likely to affect: (1) the ways people invest their resources; (2) the aspects of life people choose to preserve and protect; (3) the emotions people experience; (4) the individual's sources of strength, satisfaction, and meaning, and; (5) people's areas of greatest personal vulnerability. In short, sacred matters do appear to matter.

Conclusions

The study of sanctification is still in its infancy. Further studies are needed. One promising direction would be to focus on other potentially sacred objects, such as work, the self, community, pregnancy and the act of childbirth. For example, it would be interesting to know whether people who sanctify their work (i.e., a vocation rather than a job) invest more of themselves in their jobs and derive greater satisfaction from their occupations.

Second, longitudinal research designs are needed. Up to this point, research in this area has relied on cross-sectional designs. While we know that sanctification is linked to a variety of attitudes, emotions, and actions, longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether perceptions of the sacred, in fact, impact behavior.

Third, research in this area has focused on sanctification as an independent variable.

Additional studies should consider questions about sanctification as a dependent variable (see Doehring & Clarke, 2002). For example, how do perceptions of sacredness develop and change over the lifespan? We suspect that these perceptions grow out of a complex of personal, social, situational, and religious dimensions.

Fourth, virtually all of the research on sanctification has focused on Christian groups in the United States. It is important to consider how concepts of the sacred vary across religious groups and cultures. Differences in the way sacred aspects of life are perceived are likely to have profound implications not only for the members of various groups and cultures themselves, but also for the relationships between these group members. Research that cuts across religious groups and cultures should also examine the factors that lead to tolerance or intolerance of the sacred matters of other groups.

Fifth, the study of sanctification raises important questions about the distinction between a sanctified object and a false idol. According to most religious traditions, it makes a great deal of difference what the individual holds sacred. For example, Jordan (1986) states that: "A fundamental task of pastoral counseling is to challenge idolatry: the worship of psychic false gods who usurp God's place at the center of the self and oppressively define people's identities" (p. 23). Researchers should consider whether the sanctification of certain objects, such as money, power, or self-aggrandizement, is, in fact, tied to personal and social costs. Another interesting hypothesis is whether individuals who sanctify in purely nontheistic terms (i.e., hold some objects sacred without any linkage of those objects to God) experience fewer of the benefits of sanctification than those who sanctify in ways both directly and indirectly related to God. And perhaps there are important differences between people who respond to sanctified objects with feelings of awe, gratitude, and humility and those who respond to sacred objects with feelings of invincibility, entitlement, and arrogance.

Finally, the study of sanctification raises questions about a potential "flip-side" to this process. While objects may be perceived to be embodiments of the divine, they may also be seen as embodiments of evil or the demonic. In fact, the two processes -- sanctification and

demonization -- may be closely interconnected, for those who commit desecrations against sacred objects may be perceived as demonic in nature. As Eliade (1957) noted, since our world is a cosmos, those who attack it are “assimilated to the enemies of the gods, the demons, and especially to the archdemon, the primordial dragon conquered by the gods at the beginning of time” (p. 48). Historically, a variety of groups that are perceived as threats to the sacred world have been defined as demonic: women labeled witches, people suffering from mental illness, despotic leaders, and members of rival cultures and religious groups. And, it is important to add, demonic qualities can be attributed to other aspects of life as well, including ideas (e.g., theory of evolution), attitudes and emotions (e.g., selfishness, lust), material goods (e.g., money), and actions (e.g., violence, incest). The study of how objects come to be perceived as demonic and the implications of these perceptions for human behavior represent significant and exciting areas for additional research.

We hope it is clear by this point that the study of sanctification is not simply a theoretical exercise. If the promise of these initial findings is borne out in subsequent research, then several practical questions will arise. For example, how do we teach people to sanctify various aspects of life? At the same time, how do we encourage people to respect differences in the definitions of what they and others hold as sacred? We suspect many of the most intractable conflicts in the world (e.g., conflicts in the Middle East) have to do with varying perceptions of what is a reflection of the spiritual realm and what defiles that world (see Mahoney, 2002). And we suspect that an ultimate resolution will not be forthcoming until the spiritual character of the conflict is fully acknowledged and integrated into the search for solutions. Within the context of psychotherapy and pastoral counseling, greater attention to the concept of sanctification may also prove to be helpful. Simply asking clients what they hold sacred may offer important insights into their personal and spiritual lives. Helping them discern the difference between constructive and destructive sanctified objects may also prove useful. For example, Jordan (1986) describes the case of a woman who had sanctified a set of “secular scriptures.” In the process of pastoral counseling, Jordan helped this woman articulate these destructive “false

idols” (e.g., Thou shalt guide thyself by fear; Thou shalt not upset other people and hurt their feelings; Thou shalt hold thyself back), and replace them with a healthier set of sacred beliefs (e.g., I am a spark of God which grows bright and clearer every day; I am abundant, filled with the presence of God; I am a vital and integrally important part of the flow of life).

To conclude, the topic of sanctification pushes the scientific study of religion beyond a focus on traditional religious concepts and practices, such as beliefs in God, personal religious orientations, prayer, and congregational involvement. It suggests that virtually any aspect of life -- from the material to the sublime, from the local to the global, from the individual to the interpersonal, from the ordinary to the extraordinary -- may hold religious and spiritual significance. Our sentiments are very much in accord with those of Donald Capps (1977) who wrote: “Religion must be approached as a constituent in a total complex of meaning. The religious is not elusive because it lurks behind ordinary phenomena but because it is woven into these phenomena. This interwovenness suggests that no ordinary phenomenon can necessarily be ruled out as the bearer of religious meaning, nor can it automatically be relegated to derivative status” (p. 48). The study of sanctification suggests a way to open up the scientific study of religion to a variety of phenomena of interest. Indeed, it directs our attention to perhaps the most appropriate place for our field, where heaven meets earth.

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