

Religious Meaning and Subjective Well-Being in Late Life

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Objectives. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between religious meaning and subjective well-being. A major emphasis is placed on assessing race differences in the relationship between these constructs.

Methods. Interviews were conducted with a nationwide sample of older White and older Black adults. Survey items were administered to assess a sense of meaning in life that is derived specifically from religion. Subjective well-being was measured with indices of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism.

Results. The findings suggest that older adults who derive a sense of meaning in life from religion tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism. The data further reveal that older Black adults are more likely to find meaning in religion than older White adults. In addition, the relationships among religious meaning, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism tend to be stronger for older African Americans persons than older White persons.

Discussion. Researchers have argued for some time that religion may be an important source of resilience for older Black adults, but it is not clear how these beneficial effects arise. The data from this study suggest that religious meaning may be an important factor.

A rapidly growing literature suggests that greater involvement in religion is associated with better physical health, better mental health, and enhanced feelings of subjective well-being across the life course (Ellison, 1994; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; McFadden, 1995). With respect to well-being, the potentially beneficial effects of religion have been observed with a wide range of outcomes, including life satisfaction (Ellison, 1993), happiness (Poloma & Pendleton, 1990), self-esteem (Krause, 1995), and optimism (Idler & Kasl, 1997). Although this research has provided many valuable insights, it is less evident how the potentially beneficial effects of religion on subjective well-being arise. Part of the difficulty may be traced to the fact that religion is a complex multidimensional phenomenon that may affect well-being in a number of different ways (Ellison & Levin, 1998). For example, research indicates that religious coping (Pargament, 1997), prayer (Poloma & Gallup, 1991), and church-based social support (Krause, Ellison, & Wulff, 1998) may all play a role in this process.

To understand more fully the relationship between religion and well-being, it is important to expand the scope of inquiry by turning to dimensions of religion that have been overlooked by other investigators. The purpose of the present study is to examine one such facet of religion—religious meaning. A thorough review of the literature failed to uncover a satisfactory definition of religious meaning. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, religious meaning is defined as the process of turning to religion in an effort to find a sense of purpose in life, a sense of direction in life, and a sense that there is a reason for one's existence. Although there has been little prior empirical work with religious meaning, there is good reason to suspect it may be associated with subjective well-being. Frankl (1963) argued that the desire to find a sense of meaning is the primary motivational force in life. Moreover, a number of investigators

believe that one of the basic functions of religion is to help people fulfill this fundamental need. Evidence of this may be found, for example, in the classic work of Clark (1958), who argued that, "... religion more than any other human function satisfies the need for meaning in life" (p. 419). Similarly, in the process of developing his thought-provoking discussion of significance, Pargament (1997) observed that, "In essence, religion offers meaning in life" (p. 49).

Satisfying basic needs in life should be associated with enhanced feelings of subjective well-being (Maslow, 1971). If finding meaning in life is a basic goal of human existence, and religion helps people find meaning, it follows that religious meaning should be associated with greater subjective well-being.

The first goal of the present study is to see whether religious meaning is related to subjective well-being in late life. But rather than focus on this relationship alone, this study aims to contribute to the literature by bringing the potentially important influence of race to the foreground. This line of inquiry is justified because an extensive literature suggests that older African American persons are substantially more involved in religion than older White persons (Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1994). To the extent this is true, race differences may arise at two key junctures in this study. First, older Black adults may be more likely than older White adults to derive a sense of meaning in life from religion. Second, the impact of religious meaning on subjective well-being may be stronger for older Black than older White adults. There do not appear to be any studies in the literature that evaluate the interface between religious meaning, race, and subjective well-being in late life.

The discussion that follows is divided into three main sections. First, the theoretical underpinnings of the study are developed in greater detail. Second, the study sample and

measures are presented. The data analytic strategy is briefly presented at this juncture as well. Finally, results from a nationwide survey of older Black and older White adults are reviewed and discussed.

Religious Meaning and Subjective Well-Being in Late Life

The theoretical rationale for this study is developed below in four components. First, an effort is made to clarify the nature of religious meaning by showing how it differs from a construct that has been examined more often in the literature—a general sense of meaning in life. Second, a rationale is provided for why religious meaning may be related to subjective well-being. Third, a case is made for why it is important to study religious meaning and well-being in samples composed of older people. Finally, the reasons why there may be race differences in religious meaning and subjective well-being are examined in greater detail.

Religious meaning and a general sense of meaning in life.—Most research in the field focuses on a general sense of meaning in life (Reker, 1997). This construct is differentiated from religious meaning by its scope or focus. As Reker (2000) points out, a general sense of meaning in life can arise from any number of sources, including personal relationships, work, hobbies, and religion. In contrast, religious meaning obviously arises from one source alone. To date, most studies on religious issues rely on a general sense of meaning in life. For example, Petersen and Roy (1985) found that religious salience (i.e., the importance of religion) is associated with a greater sense of general meaning in life. However, they did not empirically evaluate meaning that arises specifically from religion, nor did they assess whether religious meaning is associated with subjective well-being. A major contribution of the present study arises from the fact that an effort is made to address these gaps in the literature.

Research that focuses specifically on religious meaning is important for the following reason. The wider intent of this study is to find out why religion may be associated with subjective well-being in late life. If meaning plays a role in this respect, then it makes more sense to focus on meaning as it arises specifically from religion. If a general sense of meaning was used instead, it would be more difficult to know if the effects were from religion, work, interpersonal relationships, or some other secular influence.

Religious meaning and subjective well-being.—Berger's (1990) widely cited work on religion helps show why religious meaning may influence feelings of subjective well-being. Berger maintained that people are inevitably confronted with a series of painful and discrepant situations in life that often are not amenable to change. Included among these difficulties are the presence of evil and suffering in the world, as well as the unavoidable prospect of death. He argued that religion helps people deal with these challenges by providing theodicies. Theodicies are religiously based world views that explain things like death, and show how they fit into a larger cosmic order or purpose. Berger (1990) asserted that people who subscribe to and internalize these theodicies derive a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life. In contrast, he argued that

people who are unable to accept religious theodicies are more likely to experience a state of anomie, which is a painful separation from the wider social order that casts the individual into a deep sense of inner turmoil.

It is surprising to find that there are relatively few empirical studies that assess Berger's (1990) notion of theodicies. One noteworthy exception is the work of Musick (2000). However, his operational definition of theodicies was fairly narrow because it focused only on the degree to which individuals feel the world, and the people in it, are evil or sinful (i.e., sin theodicies). His findings reveal that people who subscribe to sin theodicies tend to have lower levels of life satisfaction than individuals who hold more positive views about the nature of the world. However, it is important to point out that these findings held for White study participants, but not Black study participants.

Although the work of Musick (2000) provides valuable insight into the potentially important role of religious theodicies, more research is needed. More specifically, the interface between religious theodicies and well-being needs to be evaluated with measures that encompass more than just beliefs about sin and evil. Consistent with the original formulation developed by Berger (1990), measures are needed that assess beliefs about the wider meaning and purpose in life. These broader measures of religious meaning form the focal point of the analyses presented herein.

Subjective well-being is assessed in this study with three measures: life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism. Consequently, it is important to show why religious meaning might be related to each of these outcomes. There are good reasons to suspect that religious meaning may be related to life satisfaction. One of the key functions of religious meaning is to provide a better understanding of adversity and the challenges that arise in life. But more than this, religious meaning helps a person see the larger reasons for difficult situations that lie beyond their own immediate concerns, expectations, and aspirations. Attaining these insights, and believing their lives fit into a larger plan or purpose, may be a source of significant personal growth for some individuals. Realizing that one has grown in the face of adversity may, in turn, be an important source of life satisfaction.

There are relatively straightforward reasons why religious meaning may be associated with self-esteem. If older people believe that God has a purpose and a plan for their life, then it must mean that God loves and cares for them. Because feelings of self-esteem arise, in part, from views of the self that are held by significant others, believing that God values, loves, and cares for them should bolster the self-esteem of older people.

Finally, it seems reasonable to assume that if people believe religion provides a sense of direction and purpose in life, they will feel more optimistic about the future. In fact, this is one reason why Peterson (2000) argued that, "Religion lends itself particularly well to big optimism because of its certainty" (p. 51). Similarly, Seligman (1990) maintained that religious meaning enhances feelings of optimism by helping people see that their lives will follow a specific and beneficial plan that has been devised by God (see Seligman, 1990, p. 203).

Religious meaning and aging.—There are two reasons why it is important to study the relationship between religious meaning and well-being in samples comprising older people. First, as

discussed previously, Berger (1990) maintained that religious theodicies help people deal with painful life circumstances that are not changed easily. Older people are often confronted by this type of difficulty. More specifically, as Nuland's (1993) book on the physiology of aging reveals, physical decline is an unavoidable part of growing older. Although it is true that the timing and rate of decline may vary from person to person, the fact that decline will eventually occur is certain. In addition, there is some evidence that cognitive abilities tend to diminish as a number of people go through late life. More specifically, research indicates that approximately 29% of people aged 75 and older have either mild or severe cognitive impairment (George, Landerman, Blazer, & Anthony, 1991). Clearly, when coupled with the close proximity of death, finding a larger meaning and purpose in life through religion may help older people deal more effectively with these intractable physical and mental health changes.

There is also some evidence that the physical and mental health changes associated with aging may be accompanied by certain psychological challenges, as well. This is evident in the work of developmental theorists, such as Erikson (1959). He maintained that, as people approach late life, they enter the final stage of development that is characterized by the crisis of integrity versus despair. This is a time of deep introspection, when older people survey their lives, attempt to reconcile the things they have done, and make sense of the experiences they have had (see also Buhler, 1962; Butler & Lewis, 1982; Jung, 1953). Viewed broadly, a common theme cuts across the work on adult development. In particular, this literature suggests that, as people get older, they carefully re-evaluate the past in an effort to weave their lives into a more coherent whole. Ultimately, the goal of this process is to imbue life with a deeper sense of meaning. It is especially important to point out that everyone does not resolve these developmental challenges successfully, and as a Erikson (1959) argued, they may subsequently slip into despair.

Tornstam (1997) provides further evidence of how key developmental challenges may shape a sense of meaning and well-being in late life. More specifically, his theory of gerotranscendence specifies that, as people grow older, they experience a major shift, "... from a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction" (Tornstam, 1997, p. 143). It is especially important to point out that this cosmic perspective involves adopting a wider view of the nature and purpose of life.

Although people of all ages engage in a search for meaning in life, there may be age differences in the function or goal of this process. This may be seen by turning to the work of Staudinger (2001) on life reviews and reminiscence. She argued that younger people reflect on the broad issues in their lives to find solutions to a pressing life decision. In contrast, older people engage in life reviews in an effort to strike a balance in life and to integrate their lives more tightly as they have been lived. Even though reminiscence may help people of all ages, it appears to have a more immediate or pragmatic focus among the young that does not typically involve wider insights that are gleaned from reflecting deeply on the past. In contrast, by using life reviews to integrate a broad array of past experiences, older adults may be in a better position to see wider themes and purposes in life.

In addition to reviewing the work of developmental theorists, there is a second way to show why it is important to study religious meaning and well-being in late life. Some investigators maintain that people tend to become more religious as they grow older. For example, using data that had been gathered from the same respondents over a 40-year period, Wink and Dillon (2001) reported that the importance of religion decreased through early and middle adulthood, but then increased significantly during the later years of life. Based on a comparable measure of the importance of religion, Argue and her colleagues also found a pattern of nonlinear change with age, but the results were more complex (Argue, Johnson, & White, 1999). More specifically, these investigators found that the age effect of religion was stronger for Catholics than Protestants. Ploch and Hastings (1994) reported that church attendance increases sharply up to about age 70. Like Argue and colleagues (1999), Ploch and Hastings (1994) found that church attendance increases with age, but the relationship between these measures varies by religious preference (see, also, Firebaugh & Harley, 1991).

It is important to note that not all researchers would agree that religiousness increases with age. For example, Davie and Vincent (1998) review evidence suggesting that researchers may merely be observing cohort and not age effects. Nevertheless, when taken as a whole, there is some evidence in the literature that religiousness increases with age. If this is true, and a central function of religion is to provide a sense of meaning in life, then perhaps religious meaning may become increasingly important as people grow older.

Race differences in religious meaning and well-being.—The theoretical rationale provided up to this point suggests that religious meaning may promote a sense of psychological well-being among older people. But, consistent with the specific aims for this study, it is important to think about how race differences may arise in this relationship.

A considerable number of studies suggest that older Black adults are more deeply involved in religion than older White adults. In one of the more comprehensive studies, Levin and colleagues (1994) explored race differences in religion across four national surveys. Race comparisons were made on 21 indicators of religion that were contained in these different data bases. The findings indicated that older Black adults were more religious than older White adults in 19 of the 21 tests. This study revealed, for example, that compared with older White adults, older Black adults attend church more often, read religious books more often, and feel that religion is more important in their lives.

A key premise in the present study is that some fundamental underlying factor must be at work for race differences to emerge in such a wide range of religion measures. The purpose of the discussion that follows is threefold: (1) to show that this underlying factor is religious meaning; (2) to briefly trace the historical origins of this influence; and (3) to consider how the effects of religious meaning on well-being might be manifest among older White and older Black adults.

In a thought-provoking volume, Cooper-Lewter and Mitchell (1986) propose that, at the basis of Black culture, is a set of core religious beliefs, or religious world views. Included among the 10 core religious beliefs they identified are beliefs about the

nature of God and His relationship to man, as well as beliefs about basic human nature and the way people should relate to each other. They go on to point out that these core religious beliefs, "... are the bedrock attitudes that govern all deliberate behavior and relationships and also all spontaneous responses to crises" (Cooper-Lewter & Mitchell, 1986, p. 3). Although these researchers do not use the term "religious meaning" explicitly, it is hard to imagine how these core religious beliefs could function without fostering a deep sense of religious meaning.

Similar views are expressed by Ellison (1993). He argues that one of the primary functions of the church in the Black community is to provide individuals with a sense of their own inherent uniqueness as individuals. Moreover, the church promotes and rewards a range of spiritual qualities, including wisdom and morality. These important functions are, in turn, likely to promote a sense of meaning in life.

A key issue at this juncture is to determine why these core religious beliefs and functions achieved such an elevated status in the Black community. There are clear historical reasons why this may be so. A number of investigators maintain that because of centuries of discrimination and prejudice, the church became the social center of the Black community (Du Bois, 1903/2000). In addition to being the center of religious training and worship, the church also became the nucleus of social activities and a conduit for the dispersion of social services (Billingsley, 1999). As Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) point out, the church assumed this pivotal position because it was the only institution in the Black community that was wholly owned and controlled by Black persons. But the wider historical forces that were at work did more than just shape the organizational aspects of the church. In addition, these historical influences shaped the content of Black theology as well. More specifically, Paris (1995) maintained that religion in the African American community is guided by a "survival theology." Arising from centuries of slavery, discrimination, and prejudice, this survival theology emphasizes, "... the maintenance, preservation, and enhancement of meaningful life ... in the midst of the actual experience of suffering and the existential threat of death ..." (p. 48). An insightful qualitative study by Black (1999) further highlights the role played by meaning in Black theology. She found Black women were able to find meaning in poverty and racism because they, "... interpreted it as a measure of their strength, imbued it with divine purpose, and foresaw a just end" (Black, 1999, p. 372).

Although religious meaning may play a more central role in the lives of older Black people, it is important to reflect carefully on how the effects of religious meaning may be manifest. A basic premise in the present study is that there are two ways to think about this issue. First, older Black people may be more likely than older White people to find a sense of meaning in religion. This *differential involvement* perspective may be evaluated by either looking at mean differences in religious meaning for older White and older Black people or by regressing religious meaning on race.

In contrast, a second view specifies that the relationship between religious meaning and subjective well-being is stronger for older Black than for older White persons. This means that, even though older Black and older White people may have the same religious meaning score, the relationship

between religious meaning and well-being is stronger for older Blacks than older White people. This *differential impact* perspective suggests there may be something qualitatively different about the nature of religious meaning in the Black community, or that some unique facet of religious meaning is an especially important source of resilience for older Black people. The survival theology discussed by Paris (1995) provides one example of how religious meaning may be qualitatively different in the Black community. Evidence of the differential impact perspective would be found by testing for a statistical interaction effect between religious meaning and race on subjective well-being.

It is important to point out that the differential involvement and the differential impact perspectives are not mutually exclusive and that both may be operating at the same time. In contrast, only one of the two viewpoints may accurately capture the underlying process that is at work. Either way, comparing and contrasting the two approaches should provide valuable insight into the nature of the relationships among race, religious meaning, and subjective well-being in late life. There do not appear to be any studies in the literature that either discuss or empirically evaluate these two perspectives. Doing so represents another major contribution of the work presented below.

METHODS

Sample

The data for this study come from a nationwide survey of older Whites and older African American people. The study population was defined as all household residents who were either White or Black, noninstitutionalized, English-speaking, and at least 66 years of age. Geographically, the study population was restricted to eligible persons residing in the conterminous United States (i.e., residents of Alaska and Hawaii were excluded). Finally, the study was restricted to people who were currently practicing Christians, individuals who were Christians in the past but no longer practice any religion, and people who were not affiliated with any faith at any point in their lifetime. Individuals who practice a religion other than Christianity (e.g., Jews and Muslims) were excluded, because it would be difficult to devise a set of religion measures that are suitable for persons of all faiths.

The sampling frame consisted of eligible persons contained in the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) Medicare Beneficiary Eligibility List (HCFA is now called the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services). This list contains the name, address, sex, and race of virtually every person in the United States. It should be emphasized that people are included in this list even if they are not receiving Social Security benefits. Nevertheless, some older people are not in the data base because they do not have a Social Security number. This may be because of factors such as illegal immigration.

A five-step procedure was used to draw the sample. First, once each year, researchers at HCFA draw a 5% sample of names from their master file. These names are selected with a simple random sampling procedure. The sampled names include individuals who are 65 years of age or older. However, by the time the field period for the present study began, subjects in the 5% file were at least 66 years of age. It is for this reason

that the study population was defined earlier as including people who were 66 years of age or older. In the second step of the sampling procedure, the 5% file was split into two subfiles—one containing older White and the other containing older Black people. Each file was sorted by county and then by zip code within each county. Then, in the third step, an n th interval was calculated for each file based on the total number of eligible records. Following a random start, 75 n th selections were made in each file. In the fourth step of the sampling strategy, primary sampling units (i.e., PSUs) were formed by selecting approximately 25 names above and 25 names below each case identified in step three. Finally, in the last step, sampled persons within each PSU were recruited for an interview with the goal of obtaining 10 cases per PSU.

Interviewing began in March 2001 and concluded in August 2001. The data collection was performed by Louis Harris and Associates (now Harris Interactive). A total of 1,500 interviews were completed. Older Black participants were oversampled so that sufficient statistical power would be available to explore fully race differences in religion. More specifically, the sample consisted of 748 older White and 752 older Black adults. The overall response rate for the study was 62%.

After using listwise deletion of missing values to deal with item nonresponse, the number of cases used in the analyses presented herein ranged from 1,112 to 1,247. Based on the group consisting of 1,247 individuals, preliminary analysis revealed that 50% of the subjects were older White and 50% were older Black people. The average age of these people was 74.4 years ($SD = 6.37$ years). Approximately 41% were older men, and 50% were married at the time of the interview. Finally, these older adults reported they had successfully completed an average of 11.5 years of schooling ($SD = 3.38$ years). These descriptive data, as well as the findings presented herein, are based on weighted data.

Measures

Table 1 contains the survey items that are used in this study. Table 2 provides the means and standard deviations by race for all study measures. In addition, Table 2 contains the results of simple t -tests that were conducted to see if the means differ significantly for older White and older African American adults.

Religious meaning.—A series of questions were developed especially for this study to assess religious meaning. It is important to discuss briefly how these items were written. Before the nationwide survey was conducted, 3 years were spent conducting a series of focus groups, in-depth interviews, and cognitive interviews with a separate group of 399 older White and older Black adults (see Krause, 2002, for a detailed discussion of this item development strategy). The goal of this intensive item development program was to craft a set of religion measures that capture the way older White and older Black people experience religion in daily life. Throughout, the intent was to maximize the salience of the items by using the respondents' own words to write the question stems.

As shown in Table 1, religious meaning is measured with six items. Following the recommendations of the Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging Working Group, these questions were written so that they explicitly capture meaning that arises

Table 1. Study Measures

1. Religious Meaning ^a
A. God put me in this life for a purpose.
B. God has a specific plan for my life.
C. God has a reason for everything that happens to me.
D. My faith gives me a sense of direction in my life.
E. My faith helps me better understand myself.
F. My faith helps me better understand other people.
2. Life Satisfaction
A. As I look back on my life, I am fairly well satisfied. ^a
B. I would not change the past even if I could. ^a
C. Now please think about your life as a whole. How satisfied are you with it? ^b
3. Self-Esteem ^a
A. I feel I am a person of worth, or at least on an equal plane with others.
B. I feel I have a number of good qualities.
C. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
4. Optimism ^a
A. I'm optimistic about my future.
B. In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.
C. I feel confident the rest of my life will turn out well.
5. How often do you attend religious services? ^c
6. How often do you pray by yourself? ^d

^aThese items are coded in the following manner (scoring in parentheses): strongly disagree (1); disagree (2); agree (3); strongly agree (4).

^bThis item is coded in the following manner: not satisfied at all (1); not very satisfied (2); somewhat satisfied (3); very satisfied (4); completely satisfied (5).

^cThis item is coded in the following manner: never (1); less than once a year (2); about once or twice a year (3); several times a year (4); about once a month (5); 2–3 times a month (6); nearly every week (7); every week (8); several times a week (9).

^dThis item is coded in the following manner: never (1); less than once a month (2); once a month (3); a few times a month (4); once a week (5); a few times a week (6); once a day (7); several times a day (8).

from religion, and not a more general sense of meaning that might come from any number of sources (Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging, 1999).

In addition to focusing specifically on religious meaning, these indicators were crafted with a second measurement issue in mind. As the members of the Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging (1999) Working Group observed, many measures that assess a general sense of meaning in life are confounded with psychological well-being. Evidence of this may be found in Reker's (1997) definition of a general sense of meaning in life. In his view, meaning involves, "... having a purpose in life, having a sense of direction, a sense of order and a reason for existence, a clear personal identity ..." (Reker, 1997, p. 10). By specifying that a clear personal identity is part of a general sense of meaning in life, Reker (1997) may be confounding meaning with self-esteem. Consequently, when the religious meaning items were being developed for the present study, an effort was made to avoid question stems that include direct references to well-being outcome measures.

As shown in Table 1, the indicators of religious meaning that are used in this study are coded so that a high score represents a greater sense of religious meaning in life. An exploratory factor analysis revealed that the six religious meaning indicators reflect a single underlying construct. The internal

Table 2. Descriptive Data for Study Measures

Variable		Older White Adults	Older African American Adults	Significance Level
Age	—	74.631	74.153	<i>ns</i>
	<i>SD</i>	6.376	6.369	
Sex	—	.433	.395	<i>ns</i>
	<i>SD</i>	.496	.489	
Education	—	12.419	10.697	.001
	<i>SD</i>	3.090	3.424	
Marital Status	—	.611	.387	.001
	<i>SD</i>	.488	.488	
Church Attendance	—	5.667	6.358	.001
	<i>SD</i>	2.837	2.317	
Private Prayer	—	6.436	7.380	.001
	<i>SD</i>	2.069	1.152	
Religious Meaning	—	19.616	21.418	.001
	<i>SD</i>	3.760	2.825	
Life Satisfaction	—	9.906	10.084	<i>ns</i>
	<i>SD</i>	1.751	1.851	
Self-esteem	—	10.186	10.705	.001
	<i>SD</i>	1.421	1.427	
Optimism	—	9.218	9.896	.001

Note: *ns* = not significant; *SD* = standard deviation.

consistency reliability estimate for this newly devised scale (.946) is quite good and provides one way of demonstrating that the time-consuming, item development strategy used in this study was justified (Krause, 2002).

Life satisfaction.—A brief three-item measure of life satisfaction was administered to the subjects in this study. The first two indicators come from the Life Satisfaction Index A (Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1961). The third-listed item assesses satisfaction with life as a whole. A high score on these indicators means that study participants feel more satisfied with the way their lives have turned out. The internal consistency reliability estimate for this short scale is .721.

Self-esteem.—Three items were also used to assess self-esteem. These indicators come from the widely used scale that was developed by Rosenberg (1965). A high score denotes greater feelings of self-worth. The reliability estimate for this brief composite is .907.

Optimism.—Optimism was measured with three indicators. Two come from the scale developed by Scheier and Carver (1985). These items assess whether study participants expect the best in uncertain times and whether they are optimistic about the future. The third item deals with feeling confident that the rest of one's life will turn out well. This indicator was based on insights provided by the respondents in the qualitative work that was discussed earlier (Krause, 2002). More specifically, a number of older study participants indicated their faith made them feel that no matter what may happen in the future, things will turn out well. All three indicators are coded so that a high score denotes greater optimism. The reliability estimate for this scale is .816.

Race.—A binary variable was used to contrast older White (scored 1) with older African American adults (scored 0).

Religious control measures.—To show that religious meaning is worthy of further investigation, it is important to show that it exerts a significant effect even after the influence of other well-known religious correlates of well-being are controlled statistically. Two additional religion measures were included in the analysis for this purpose. As shown in Table 1, the first assesses the frequency of church attendance, whereas the second measures the frequency of private prayer. These indicators are coded so that a high score reflects more frequent church attendance or more frequent private prayer.

Demographic control measures.—The relationship between religious meaning and psychological well-being was assessed after the effects of age, sex, education, and marital status were controlled statistically. Age is scored in a continuous format. Similarly, education is coded in a continuous format reflecting the total number of years of completed schooling. Sex is a binary variable contrasting men (scored 1) with women (scored 0), and marital status is a binary indicator in which a score of 1 is assigned to older study participants who were married at the time of the survey, and a score of 0 stands for older people who were not married when the interview took place.

Data Analysis Strategy

Three hypotheses are evaluated in this study. The first two are designed to test the differential involvement perspective. The first hypothesis states that older African American adults should report higher levels of religious meaning than older White adults. The second specifies that religious meaning should, in turn, be positively associated with life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism. Tests of these hypotheses will be conducted using ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression analysis. The first hypothesis will be evaluated by regressing religious meaning on race and the control variables, whereas the second will be assessed by regressing well-being on religious meaning and the other study measures.

Hypothesis 3 is more complex and is designed to evaluate the differential impact perspective. This hypothesis states that the relationship between religious meaning and well-being will be stronger for older Black than older White people. Stated in more technical terms, this specification calls for a statistical interaction effect between race and religious meaning on well-being. Hypothesis 3 will also be evaluated with OLS multiple regression procedures. However, in this instance, the regression equations will be estimated in a three-step hierarchical fashion. The additive effects of church attendance, private prayer, race, and the control measures will be entered in the first step. In the second step, religious meaning will be added to the model. This makes it possible to evaluate an issue that has not been discussed up to this point. More specifically, a good deal of research indicates that the frequency of church attendance and private prayer are associated with subjective well-being in late life (Koenig et al., 2001). However, it is not entirely clear why these behavioral measures of religion are related to well-being. The second step in the hierarchical regression analysis tests the proposition that older people who go to church often and pray frequently enjoy a greater sense of well-being, because these religious activities foster a sense of meaning in life. Evidence of this would be found if the

strength of the relationship between church attendance and well-being, as well as private prayer and well-being, is diminished after religious meaning is entered into the equation.

The third step in the hierarchical analysis tests the proposed statistical interaction effect between race and religious meaning on well-being. This step is executed by adding a multiplicative or cross-product term to the model (religious meaning \times race). The size of this multiplicative term reflects the difference between the net effects of religious meaning on well-being for older White people and the net effects of religious meaning on well-being for older Black people. The procedures described by Aiken and West (1991) are used to interpret and evaluate the interactions that emerge between race and religious meaning on well-being. More specifically, these hand calculations yield three estimates: (1) unstandardized regression coefficients representing the relationship between religious meaning and well-being for older Black and older White people, respectively; (2) *t*-tests that are designed to see if these coefficients differ significantly from zero; and (3) standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between religious meaning and well-being in each racial group.

RESULTS

The findings are presented here in two sections. First, tests of the differential involvement perspective are conducted. Following this, the differential impact perspective is evaluated.

Differential Involvement

Table 3 contains the findings from the regressions analysis that were designed to see if levels of religious meaning are higher in older Black than older White adults. These analyses were performed in two steps. The demographic variables and the binary race indicator were entered into the equation in Step 1 (see Model 1 in Table 3). Then, the frequency of church attendance and private prayer were added to these independent variables in Step 2 (see Model 2). The findings from Model 1 reveal that, compared with older Black adults, older White adults are less likely to find a sense of meaning in religion (Beta = $-.252$; $p < .001$). The observed race difference in religious meaning continues to be statistically significant after church attendance and private prayer are entered into the equation, but the size of the standardized regression coefficient is reduced by about 60% (Beta = $-.101$; $p < .001$). Taken together, the findings from both models reveal that older Black people are more likely than older White people to find meaning in religion, and this race difference is largely because older Black adults pray more often and attend church more frequently than older White adults. Viewed more broadly, the data support an important facet of the differential involvement perspective: Older Black people are more likely than older White people to derive a sense of meaning from their faith. However, for the differential involvement perspective to be fully evaluated, it is important to show that religious meaning is, in turn, associated with well-being. This issue is addressed in the next section in the process of evaluating the differential impact perspective.

Differential Impact

Life satisfaction.—Table 4 contains the results of the analyses that were designed to explore the relationships among

Table 3. Relationship Between Race and Religious Meaning
($N = 1,247$)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Age	-.040 ^a (-.021) ^b	-.029 (-.016)
Sex	-.138*** (-.962)	-.003 (-.023)
Education	-.050 (-.051)	-.064** (-.065)
Marital Status	.040 (.277)	.010 (.068)
Race	-.252*** (-1.729)	-.101*** (-.693)
Church Attendance	—	.205*** (.271)
Private Prayer	—	.435*** (.865)
Intercept	28.813	15.154
Multiple R^2	.090	.357

^aStandardized regression coefficient.

^bMetric (unstandardized) regression coefficient.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

race, religion, and life satisfaction. The data in the left-hand column of this table (Model 1) reveal that older adults who attend church often (Beta = $.078$; $p < .05$) and older people who pray frequently (Beta = $.124$; $p < .001$) tend to have a greater sense of life satisfaction than older adults who do not go to church or pray often. However, two important findings emerge from the data when religious meaning is entered into the equation (see Model 2). First, church attendance (Beta = $.015$; *ns*) and private prayer (Beta = $-.005$; *ns*) no longer exert a statistically significant influence on feelings of life satisfaction. This suggests that the frequently observed relationship between these behavioral measures of religion and life satisfaction may be explained by the new measure of religious meaning that was developed for this study. The second major finding to emerge from Model 2 has to do with the additive effects of religious meaning on well-being. More specifically, the data suggest that, for the sample taken as a whole, greater religious meaning is associated with greater life satisfaction (Beta = $.293$; $p < .001$). When coupled with the results presented in the previous section, these data provide support for the differential involvement perspective. More specifically, these findings suggest that, compared with older White adults, religious meaning appears to play a larger role in shaping life satisfaction among older Black persons.

The data on the right-hand side of Table 3 (Model 2) reveal further that the differential impact perspective may provide valuable insight, as well. More specifically, the findings suggest there is a statistically significant interaction effect between race and religious meaning on life satisfaction ($b = -.145$; $p < .001$; unstandardized regression coefficients are discussed because standardized estimates are meaningless in this context). Based on the procedures provided by Aiken and West (1991), further hand calculations reveal that the size of the relationship between religious meaning and psychological well-being for older Black adults (Beta = $.447$; $p < .001$) is about two and a half times larger than the corresponding estimate for older White adults (Beta = $.170$; $p < .001$). Viewed more generally, these data indicate that, although religious meaning appears to

Table 4. The Relationships Among Race, Religious Meaning, and Life Satisfaction ($N = 1,188$)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	.019 ^a (.005) ^b	.029 (.008)	.024 (.007)
Sex	-.018 (-.065)	-.018 (-.065)	-.016 (-.060)
Education	-.003 (-.002)	.018 (.010)	.011 (.006)
Marital Status	.088** (.317)	.084** (.303)	.084** (.303)
Race	-.023 (-.082)	.003 (.012)	.018 (.065)
Church Attendance	.078* (.054)	.015 (.011)	.020 (.014)
Private Prayer	.124*** (.129)	-.005 (-.005)	.027 (.030)
Religious Meaning	—	.293*** (.154)	.313*** (.164)
(Race × Religious Meaning)	—	—	(-.145)***
Intercept	10.001	9.998	9.933
Multiple R^2	.037	.092	.108

^aStandardized regression coefficient.

^bMetric (unstandardized) regression coefficient.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Relationships Among Race, Religious Meaning, and Self-Esteem ($N = 1,217$)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	-.027 ^a (-.006) ^b	-.018 (-.004)	-.023 (-.005)
Sex	.038 (.112)	.040 (.116)	.040 (.118)
Education	.127*** (.055)	.145*** (.062)	.137*** (.059)
Marital Status	-.024 (-.070)	-.025 (-.074)	-.025 (-.072)
Race	-.174*** (-.504)	-.145*** (-.419)	-.130*** (-.376)
Church Attendance	.142*** (.079)	.078* (.043)	.083** (.046)
Private Prayer	.050 (.042)	-.081* (-.068)	-.049 (-.041)
Religious Meaning	—	.301*** (.127)	.322*** (.136)
(Race × Religious Meaning)	—	—	(-.115)***
Intercept	10.452	10.452	10.401
Multiple R^2	.079	.137	.153

^aStandardized regression coefficient.

^bMetric (unstandardized) regression coefficient.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

bolster the life satisfaction of both older White and older Black adults, older African Americans may enjoy a substantially greater benefit.

Self-esteem.—Findings from the analyses that were designed to explore the relationships among race, religion, and self-esteem are provided in Table 5. The data in the left-hand column of this table (Model 1) reveal that older adults who go to church often tend to have greater feelings of self-worth than older people who do not go to church as frequently (Beta = .142; $p < .001$). But, in contrast, the frequency of private prayer is not significantly related to self-esteem (Beta = .050; ns). Nevertheless, as the data provided by Model 2 reveal, the relationship between church attendance, private prayer, and self-esteem changes once religious meaning is added to the equation. More specifically, the size of the relationship between church attendance and self-esteem is reduced by about 45% (Beta = .078; $p < .05$), but the relationship between private prayer and self-esteem changes in a way that initially is somewhat surprising. In particular, the data indicate that older people who pray more often tend to have lower feelings of self-worth (Beta = $-.081$; $p < .05$). Finally, the data in Model 2 suggest that, as anticipated, older people who find a strong sense of meaning in their faith tend to have greater feelings of self-worth than older adults who do not derive a sense of meaning from religion (Beta = .301; $p < .001$).

Two important findings emerge from the data provided by Model 3. First, the unanticipated relationship between private prayer and self-esteem disappears (Beta = $-.049$; ns) once tests are performed for the interaction between race and religious meaning on self-esteem. This means that the unexpected finding that emerged in Model 2 is because this model was misspecified (i.e., the relationship between race and religious meaning was

not assessed properly). The second, and more important, result to emerge from Model 3 suggests that the relationship between religious meaning and self-esteem appears to be stronger for older Black than for older White people ($b = -.115$; $p < .001$). The nature of these race differences may be illustrated more clearly with the procedures provided by Aiken and West (1991). These additional analyses indicate that the relationship between religious meaning and self-esteem among older Black adults (Beta = .456; $p < .001$) is approximately two and a half times larger than that of older White adults (Beta = .183; $p < .001$). Taken as a whole, the results presented in this section suggest that both the differential involvement and the differential impact perspectives help explain why religious meaning plays a larger role in shaping feelings of self-worth among older Blacks than older White adults.

Optimism.—The data in Table 6 reveal that older people who go to church frequently tend to be more optimistic than older adults who do not attend church as often (Beta = .181; $p < .001$; see Model 1). But, in contrast, private prayer does not appear to be significantly associated with a sense of optimism (Beta = .048; ns). However, as with the other well-being outcome measures, the relationship between church attendance, private prayer, and optimism changes once religious meaning is added to the equation (see Model 2). More specifically, after the effects of religious meaning are taken into account, the size of the relationship between church attendance and optimism is reduced by approximately 44%. This suggests that religious meaning explains part of the reason why church attendance is associated with optimism in late life. However, the data in Table 6 further reveal that once religious meaning is added to the equation, private prayer appears to have a negative effect on optimism (Beta = $-.120$; $p < .001$). Finally, the results from

Model 2 indicate that, as anticipated, older people who derive a strong sense of meaning from religion tend to be more optimistic than older adults who do not find meaning in religion (Beta = .381; $p < .001$).

Two major findings emerge from the data once tests are performed to assess the proposed interaction effect between race and religious meaning on optimism. First, correctly specifying the relationship between race and religious meaning tends to reduce, but not completely eliminate, the negative relationship between private prayer and optimism (Beta = $-.084$; $p < .05$). Although it is difficult to explain these unanticipated findings, it should be kept in mind that the size of this relationship is not large ($-.084$). Perhaps these results reflect the possibility that older people with a low sense of optimism pray more often in an effort to feel more positive about the future. This issue should be explored in future studies. The second major finding to emerge from Model 3 has to do with the proposed interaction effect between race and religious meaning on optimism. As the data in the right-hand side of Table 6 suggest (Model 3), the relationship between religious meaning and optimism is significantly larger for older African American people ($b = -.134$; $p < .001$). More specifically, the additional hand calculations reveal that the association between religious meaning and optimism is about twice as large for older Black people (Beta = .552; $p < .001$) than older White people (Beta = .253; $p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

Recently, some investigators have argued that the literature on race, religion, and psychological well-being is “limited,” and that a number of facets of religion have yet to be explored fully (Mattis & Jagers, 2001, p. 519). The purpose of the present study was to address this gap in the knowledge base by focusing on the potentially important influence of one facet of religion that has been overlooked in many studies—religious meaning. It was hypothesized that religious meaning is associated with a greater sense of subjective well-being in late life. In addition, it was further hypothesized that the beneficial effects of religious meaning would be especially evident among older Black people. As Frankl (1963) argued, “... suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning” (p. 135). Older African American adults have clearly experienced a good deal of suffering arising from decades of exposure to racial prejudice and discrimination (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999). As a result, a major function of the church in the Black community has been to help African American people find meaning in the face of racial oppression (Cone, 1997).

Viewed broadly, the data appear to support the hypotheses that were developed for this study. More specifically, the findings suggest that greater religious meaning is associated with more life satisfaction, higher self-esteem, and more optimism for both older White and older Black adults. However, the data further reveal that religious meaning may play a significantly larger role in shaping feelings of well-being among older Black adults. Two theoretical perspectives were evaluated to better understand the race differences that emerged from the data. The differential involvement perspective suggests that older Black persons are more likely than older White persons to find meaning in religion, and that people who find meaning in religion, in turn, enjoy a greater sense of well-

Table 6. Relationships Among Race, Religious Meaning, and Optimism ($N = 1,112$)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	-.036 ^a (-.009) ^b	.022 (-.005)	-.024 (-.006)
Sex	.001 (.002)	-.002 (-.005)	-.002 (-.006)
Education	.052 (.024)	.079** (.036)	.069* (.032)
Marital Status	-.042 (-.131)	-.039 (-.123)	-.037 (-.116)
Race	-.179*** (-.558)	-.144*** (-.447)	-.125*** (-.390)
Church Attendance	.181*** (.109)	.101*** (.061)	.110*** (.066)
Private Prayer	.048 (.043)	-.120*** (-.107)	-.084* (-.075)
Religious Meaning	—	.381*** (.172)	.406*** (.183)
(Race × Religious Meaning)	—	—	— (-.145)***
Intercept	9.567	9.567	9.504
Multiple R^2	.096	.187	.205

^aStandardized regression coefficient.

^bMetric (unstandardized) regression coefficient.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

being. In contrast, the differential impact perspective proposes that the relationship between religious meaning and well-being will be stronger for older Black adults than for older White adults, and the difference may be because of an underlying qualitative difference in the nature of religious meaning in the Black community. The data provide strong support for both perspectives. More specifically, the findings indicate that older Black people enjoy a greater sense of well-being because they derive a greater sense of meaning from religion than older White people, and because the impact of religious meaning on well-being is stronger for older Black than older White adults.

The findings from this study are noteworthy for several reasons. First, the analyses are based on data provided by a nationwide sample of older White and older Black adults. Second, carefully crafted measures were used that focus specifically on meaning that arises from religion. This appears to be the first time that anyone has explicitly evaluated the relationship between religious meaning and well-being in late life. Third, because a range of outcome measures were used, it was possible to show that the positive influence of religious meaning is fairly broad-based, instead of being manifest in one specific outcome (e.g., life satisfaction only). Fourth, this appears to be the first time the differential involvement and differential impact perspectives have been evaluated empirically within the context of religious meaning.

Although the findings from this study may make a contribution to the literature, a great deal of work remains to be done. To begin with, it is important to know more about why religious meaning may bolster feelings of well-being in late life. Although a number of factors are likely to be involved, stressful life events may play an important role in this process. More specifically, religious meaning may exert a positive influence on well-being, because it helps older people cope more effectively with the pernicious effects of stress (Musick, 2000).

In addition, it is important to learn more about why religious meaning enhances the subjective well-being of older Black than older White people. The items used to assess meaning in this study ask whether religion provides a sense of purpose and understanding of life, but these indicators do not explicitly capture the unique social circumstances that older Black adults must grapple with to derive a sense of meaning in life. This was necessary so that older White and older Black persons could be compared and contrasted. But now it is time to take the next step and explore more focused facets of religious meaning. Perhaps, as Paris (1995) and others have argued, religion helps older African American adults better understand the suffering associated with slavery, racial prejudice, and discrimination. To the extent this is true, a stronger relationship may emerge if researchers use measures of religious meaning that focus specifically on these racial problems.

It would also be useful to know more about how a sense of religious meaning arises in the first place. Earlier, evidence was provided that older people who go to church more often and who pray more often tend to find a greater sense of meaning in religion. But there is likely to be more to it than this. For example, a number of researchers have argued that religion has a strong social foundation, and this communal or interpersonal emphasis is more evident in the Black community (Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Paris, 1995). If this is true, then perhaps spiritual support (i.e., mutual encouragement to adopt and practice various tenets of religion) found in church settings may be an important source of religious meaning, especially for older African American people.

Finally, as noted previously, a number of studies indicate that a general sense of meaning in life is associated with enhanced feelings of well-being (Reker, 1997). However, the findings presented herein suggest that meaning arising specifically from religion is also related to well-being. Consequently, research is needed to compare and contrast directly the two measures of meaning to see which is more strongly associated with well-being. This type of analysis should help resolve a long-standing debate in the literature about whether meaning arising specifically from religion is more important than a generalized sense of meaning that arises from a number of different sources (Naiditch, 2000).

In the process of exploring this as well as other issues related to religious meaning, researchers would benefit from paying attention to the limitations in the present study. One is especially important. The analyses were based on data that were gathered at one point in time only. As a result, the temporal ordering of the relationship between religious meaning and well-being was based on theoretical considerations alone. The inherent problem in using cross-sectional data may be illustrated by turning to the literature on a general sense of meaning in life and self-esteem. Researchers have specified the nature of the causal relationship between these constructs in nearly every possible way. For example, some investigators argue that meaning is a source of self-esteem (Reker, 1997), others assert that self-esteem is actually a dimension or component of meaning (Park & Folkman, 1997), whereas other researchers maintain that high self-esteem promotes a sense of meaning in life (Hoyle, Kernis, Leary, & Baldwin, 1999). This issue can only be addressed with a strong theoretical rationale and data that have been gathered at three or more points in time.

Writing in 1931, Jung noted that, "The least of things with a meaning is always worth more than the greatest of things without it" (Jung, 1953, p. 285). In essence, Jung (1953) suggested that nothing in life has value, unless it is meaningful. Although there are a number of ways to find meaning in life (Fowler, 1981), religion may play a particularly important role in this respect. This is especially true given the nature of the challenges that must be faced in late life, including death. Yet researchers know so little about religious meaning. Relatively little evidenced-based research exists to show how it arises, and little is known about how it helps those who face significant adversity, such as older African American people. Viewed broadly, the purpose of this study has been to bring religious meaning to the foreground by showing that it may play a significant role in shaping constructs of long-standing interest in social gerontology (i.e., life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism). Perhaps no facet of religion is as elusive as meaning. Yet, no other dimension of religion may have the potential to capture the core issues involved in negotiating the final decades of life.

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