CHAPTER TWO

THE ROLE OF DIVINE BELIEFS IN STRESS PROCESSES

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The understanding of health and well-being has benefited from Leonard Pearlin's stress process model, which provides a framework from a sociological perspective. While this model has undergone multiple iterations (e.g., Pearlin et al. 1981, Pearlin 1989, 1999), they share the central theme of attending to the ways in which “this process and its components largely arise from and are influenced by various structural arrangements in which individuals are embedded” (Pearlin 1989: 214). It is argued that these social-structural arrangements are pivotal because they influence not only individuals’ levels of exposure to stress but also the subsequent effects of stress on measurable mental health outcomes and the resources that are available to manage these outcomes.

A primary stratagem for understanding individual persons’ enmeshment in social-structural arrangements is through the study of their institutional involvements. Social institutions are, in part, social structures that organize relatively stable patterns of human activity, thereby providing structure to society (Turner 1997). Through involvement in institutions, individuals become embedded within the structural arrangements of society, which in turn shape people’s exposure and responses to adversity. Religion is a fundamental organizing institution, and of course there is a rich tradition in sociological theory and research about the ways that involvement in this institution influences personal and social functioning (e.g., Durkheim [1897] 1951).

A growing number of recent studies examining the link between religion and well-being have sought to integrate and apply the stress process model’s conceptual framework (for examples, see Ellison 1994, Ellison et al. 2001). However, the research has primarily examined behavioral indicators of such institutional involvement as the frequency of attendance at religious services, or such global indicators of religiosity as self-rated religious salience. This entails an important oversight in the past because, at its most basic level, religion is about
belief (Froese and Bader 2007: 466), and “for many believers, the cultivation of an intimate relationship with God is a cornerstone of religious life” (Exline 2002: 185). Thus, while the importance of behavioral aspects of religion for well-being should not be dismissed, beliefs about the divine are a pivotal means of involvement in religious institutions; in turn, these beliefs may be critical for understanding the links between religious involvement and psychological well-being.

In this chapter, we use the stress process model as a framework for delineating the ways in which divine beliefs may influence well-being. We focus on theory and research related to two core themes: (1) the association between beliefs about God and psychological well-being (direct and indirect effects); and (2) the way in which these beliefs may alter the relationship between stress and psychological well-being (moderating effects). Throughout, we attend to the possibility that beliefs about God may have both positive and negative implications for stress processes and mental health outcomes.

Beliefs about God and Psychological Well-Being

One of the most common hypotheses about the benefits of religion is that it provides comfort to believers (Spilka et al. 2003). A core feature of this hypothesis is the contention that some religious beliefs may instill a sense of optimism and encouragement during particularly onerous times. Decades ago, Larry Petersen and Anita Roy (1985: 52) underscored the significance of particular beliefs about God’s causal agency in the relationship between adversity and psychological well-being:

Biblical passages (and religious leaders) frequently stress the notion that God is a personal being who watches over and cares for adherents’ lives and that He intervenes to ensure that their problems will be favorably resolved. The internalization of this notion should allow the individual to be optimistic even in the face of difficult problems and thereby reduce feelings of apprehension or discouragement. Consequently, it is predicted that religious comfort beliefs will be negatively related to anxiety.

Accordingly, elements of one’s personal relationship with God would diminish stress and tension. Simply put: Believers should have better mental health.

Petersen and Roy tested their argument using what they labeled “religious comfort beliefs,” or the extent to which individuals believe