

Rethinking Self-Transcendent Positive Emotions and Religion: Insights From Psychological and Biblical Research

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At the heart of many religious and spiritual traditions is the aspiration to transcend the self to achieve a sense of connectedness with the world and/or with a Higher Power and to serve the greater good. Recent research suggests that the emergence of such self-transcendence can be facilitated by specific uplifting emotions termed *self-transcendent positive emotions* (STPEs); STPEs are short, positive responses to witnessing instances of beauty or good outside the self. The author reviews the defining characteristics of STPEs and the related current empirical research in psychology. Next, still building upon research in psychology, she examines how they are intertwined with spirituality and religion (beliefs and practices) and serve important functions when experienced in a religious context. The emerging biblical research on how positive emotions are constructed in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament is studied, and how the religious context may modify the interpretation and phenomenological experience of positive emotions is discussed. Future avenues for research include the study of the specific emotion of joy and a better consideration of emotion's embodiment.

Keywords: positive emotions, religion, spirituality, Bible

At the heart of many religious and spiritual traditions is the aspiration to transcend the self to achieve a sense of connectedness with the world and/or with a Higher Power and to serve the greater good. Recent research suggests that the emergence of such self-transcendence can be facilitated by specific uplifting emotions, termed *self-transcendent positive emotions* (STPEs). These emotions will be the focus of the present article. First, I review the defining characteristics of STPEs and the related current empirical research in psychology. Next, still building upon research in psychology, I examine how they are intertwined with spirituality and religion (beliefs and practices) and serve important functions when experienced in a religious context. Then, we will study the emerging biblical research on how general positive emotions are constructed in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament. In conclusion, I highlight potential ways through which the knowledge accrued from that study can inform future empirical research on STPEs and their relation to religion.

STPEs

Positive emotions broaden attention in the moment and set the stage for self-transcendence to emerge (cf. broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, Fredrickson, 2013). The term *self-transcendence* refers to a sense of reduced self-awareness and increased connectedness with others, which facilitates the emergence of prosocial behavior (See also Van Cappellen & Rimé, 2014). Positive emotions have been shown to promote global (vs.

local) processing, one's ability to see the big picture (e.g., Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Wadlinger & Isaacowitz, 2011) as well as contribute to social trust and the formation of common in-group identities (e.g., Dovidio, Gaertner, Isen, & Lowrance, 1995; Johnson & Fredrickson, 2005). Although the studies just cited rarely investigate the differences between individual, distinct positive emotions, initial evidence suggests that a subset of positive emotions has the unique ability to push this broaden process even further and break down rigid boundaries between the self and others. This subset of positive emotions supports the experience of self-transcendence, hence their appellation STPEs, and are also known as *moral emotions* (Haidt, 2003), or *appreciation emotions* (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1990; Schindler, Zink, Windrich, & Menninghaus, 2013). STPEs are elicited by the witnessing of greater good or beauty that are separate from oneself. According to Haidt (2003), STPEs have two characteristics. First, their elicitors do not directly contribute to self-interest or personal goals. Instead, their elicitors are other-focused or stimulus-focused. For example, the STPE elevation is triggered by seeing someone helping another person, a situation that does not bring a direct benefit to the self. This reduced self-salience appears to lead to the second characteristic of STPEs, the activation of care for others and prosocial actions. STPEs encourage the individual to engage in actions that may benefit others or the broader society.

Each positive emotion is related, to a greater or lesser degree, to each of the two characteristics that make a self-transcendent positive emotion, that is, other-focused and having prosocial action tendencies (Haidt, 2003). There is not a consensus or a strict list of positive emotions that are considered self-transcendent. However, certain positive emotions are often considered self-transcendent and have initial empirical evidence demonstrating their self-transcendent quality. These emotions are awe, gratitude, elevation, admiration, love, compassion, and peacefulness. Missing from this list are joy and other positive emotions that could potential can-

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didates for STPEs status, especially when considering experiences in the religious context. Future research is necessary to assess whether these other positive emotions indeed fit the definition of STPEs.

Awe

Awe is the emotional response to perceptually vast stimuli that are greater and beyond current understanding (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Prototypical elicitors of awe include panoramic views of nature, childbirth, and great works of art (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007). This emotion leads to more stimulus-focused attention and reduced awareness of the self (Shiota et al., 2007). Among the self-transcendent positive emotions, awe seems to be the least social. Still, awe is often considered a social emotion because of its demonstrated effects on prosocial behavior (Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015). Awe seems to tune our attention toward the greater good. It has also been related to a sense of extended connection with others and feeling part of a universal category (“oceanic feeling,” Shiota et al., 2007). Awe is also theorized to be transformative and bring about new worldviews. It is the prototypical emotion of religious conversion (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Because awe is triggered when the self is faced with something vast and beyond current understanding, the experience of awe is difficult to assimilate and instead triggers the need to accommodate cognitively. Therefore, it elicits the need to reshape and extend knowledge (Armstrong & Detweiler-Bedell, 2008). However, awe is not always an entirely positive emotion. Sometimes, the self cannot accommodate the experience and this inability becomes overwhelming and fear inducing. Moreover, multiple studies have reported increased levels of negative emotions, especially sadness, during video-clips inducing STPEs, including awe (Saroglou, Buxant, & Tilquin, 2008; Van Cappellen, Saroglou, Iweins, Piovesana, & Fredrickson, 2013). A subjective sense of existential security, an aspect that has not been much investigated in empirical research, seems to be key for the experience of awe to remain a positive one (Konecni, 2005).

Gratitude

Gratitude is the self-transcendent emotion that has gathered the most attention. It is the emotional response to the recognition that one’s good fortunes are the result of the intentional good deeds of someone else (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2004). It therefore inherently implies a certain degree of other-focus. Gratitude triggers the desire to reciprocate the good deed (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Beyond, it also fosters a desire to be close to the benefactor. Thus, gratitude is identified as an important mechanism in the formation and maintenance of relationships (see Find-Bind-Remind theory, Algoe, 2012). Many interventions have been developed to cultivate feelings of gratitude and have shown additional benefits of gratitude such as for well-being and health (for a review, see Emmons & Mishra, 2011). Relevant here, participants randomly assigned to count their blessings reported more positive emotions and enhanced feelings of connectedness to others over the course of 2 weeks (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that gratitude fosters prosocial behaviors toward the benefactor as well as toward strangers (Bartlett & DeSteno,

2006; Tsang, 2006), and increases motivation to contribute to society among early adolescents (Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010). Finally, along with elevation and admiration, there is some preliminary evidence suggesting that gratitude fosters self-improvement (Emmons & Mishra, 2011).

Elevation and Admiration

Elevation is the emotional response to witnessing an exemplar of moral values. For example, witnessing acts of charity, gratitude, service, or other good deeds trigger a pleasant and warm feeling in the chest that Haidt (2003) coined elevation. Elevation, along with admiration, is part of the family of positive emotions that is considered “other-praising” (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). *Admiration* is the emotional response to witnessing an exemplar of talent and skill (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Onu, Kessler, & Smith, 2016). In a religious context admiration may be used interchangeably with terms such as adoration or reverence. According to Schindler and colleagues (2013), adoration is triggered when the exemplar displays a level of excellence that is not attainable or fully understood. Elevation and admiration both trigger a desire to get closer and become more like the target: for elevation, this is a desire to emulate excellence in virtue, for admiration, to emulate excellence in skill. More broadly, there is some indication that these emotions, especially elevation, make us want to become better people (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Induction of elevation has been shown to increase helping behaviors where the induction of amusement and happiness did not (Cox, 2010; Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010). Interestingly, elevation also seems to directly reduce certain social biases. Indeed, induction of elevation, has been shown to reduce gay prejudice, a type of prejudice strongly associated with disgust and theorized as the opposite of elevation (Lai, Haidt, & Nosek, 2014). Finally, both elevation and admiration promote the general positive worldview that people and the world are benevolent (Van Cappellen et al., 2013).

Love and Compassion

Although the most universal and frequently experienced emotion, love, has not been the focus of much empirical research (Fredrickson, 2013), recent theorization of love points to certain characteristics that are close to those of STPEs (i.e., other focus and prosociality). Love is elicited by warm feelings and care for another’s well-being (Fredrickson, 2013). Attachment love, felt toward attachment figures, is sometimes distinguished from nurturing love, which is felt toward the young, helpless, or cute (Shiota et al., 2014). Broadly, Fredrickson (2013) argued that love arises when any positive emotion is shared in the context of a safe relationship. Within the interpersonal context, love seems to foster care, social connection, and focus on ones’ partner (Fredrickson, 2013). Preliminary evidence also suggests that inducing feelings of love increases pro-social behavior toward distant others (Cavanaugh, Bettman, & Luce, 2015).

Compassion is the feeling of being moved by another’s suffering and leads to a subsequent desire to help (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). Compassion increases perceptions of similarity with the sufferer (Oveis, Horberg, & Keltner, 2010) and encourages prosocial actions to reduce the other’s suffering (e.g., Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981). Although

compassion is often presented as a positive emotion that generates positive social outcomes and is associated with feelings of warmth and tenderness (e.g., *Shiota, Keltner, & John, 2006*), it does have some distressing antecedents (because the other is suffering in some ways).

Peacefulness

Peacefulness is often used interchangeably with serenity or contentment. It is a low arousal positive state that is typically more valued in East Asian cultures than in Western culture (*Tsai, Chim, & Sims, 2015*). Peacefulness is the emotion prompted by situations appraised as safe, with a high degree of certainty, and with a low degree of effort (*Fredrickson, 1998*). This emotion prompts individuals to savor and cherish their current circumstances. Yet, it is not an entirely self-focused process, as it seems to be accompanied by a broader outlook on life (i.e., rethinking one's priorities and values), as well as feeling as one with the world. Like other STPEs such as awe or gratitude, peacefulness is theorized to create a new sense of self and of worldviews (*Izard, 1977*).

Joy?

Joy is one of the only positive emotions that makes most basic emotion lists; as a result, joy received early attention from affective scientists. *Joy* is defined as a high arousal affective response to unexpected good fortune (*Fredrickson, 2013*). Joy typically implies an improvement in resources (e.g., receiving a reward) that leads people to experience an increase in energy (e.g., wanting to jump up and down) and is associated with aimless activation (*Frijda, 1986; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987*). However, it is rarely studied as a specific positive emotion, distinct from other related positive emotions, perhaps because joy's definition appears very general. Indeed, joy is sometimes understood as an umbrella term for any positive feeling (*Herring, Burlison, Roberts, & Devine, 2011*). It is also sometimes confounded with happiness and used as its synonym (*Ekman & Davidson, 1994*). Given that happiness is used to refer to a general sense of well-being and to more cognitive evaluation of one's life as a whole (*Diener & Diener, 1996*), it should be distinguished from the emotion of joy.

Joy's current definition in psychology does not reflect many self-transcendent characteristics; on the contrary, the self appears to be central to the experience of joy. However, this definition stands in contrast with joy's presentation in biblical and theological writings (e.g., *Crisp & Volf, 2015; Morrice, 1984; Muffs, 1992*). Joy is one of the most studied positive emotions in these writings, especially because it is assumed to be conducive for self-transcendence. Accounts of joy in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament exemplify these potential self-transcendent qualities and will provide preliminary justification for psychology to empirically investigate whether joy can be considered a STPE and under what circumstances.

STPEs and the Emergence of Meaning, Spirituality, and Religious Beliefs

Recent research suggests that STPEs may share a third characteristic; their implication in spiritual/religious beliefs and in the

process of finding meaning. Empirical evidence supporting this assumption exists for awe, elevation, and admiration. Future work should test whether inducing other STPEs promote these outcomes.

Regarding meaning, although work has shown that experiences of positive emotions, in general, predispose individuals to feel that life is meaningful (*King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006*), more recent work inducing specific positive emotions has revealed that the STPEs of elevation promotes meaning in life, over the effects of other positive emotions such as amusement (*Van Cappellen et al., 2013*).

Regarding spirituality and religiosity, most of the prior literature has investigated how spirituality and religion may compensate for negative experiences (e.g., illness, death of a loved one). However, recent studies have shown that positive experiences, and more specifically STPEs, may also support spiritual and religious beliefs. Across four experiments, inducing awe compared to amusement or no emotion led participants to become more spiritually minded and report greater belief in God (*Saroglou et al., 2008; Valdesolo & Graham, 2014*). However, as explained earlier, awe is not an entirely positive emotion and indeed, *Valdesolo and Graham (2014)* also found that the effect of awe on belief in God was partially accounted for by awe's effect on tolerance for uncertainty. Following a compensation model, they found that awe decreased tolerance for uncertainty, explaining the greater reliance on a belief in God and supernatural control. Despite the lack of clear evidence that religious and spiritual beliefs can be the result of a positive—not compensatory—process, these findings paved the way for further research on other STPEs of elevation and admiration. Across two experiments, inducing elevation or admiration led participants to be more spiritually minded (as measured by the Spiritual Transcendence Scale, *Piedmont, 1999*, and a one-item measure of how important spirituality is in one's life) compared to participants in the amusement and control conditions. Importantly, positive and secular mechanisms accounted for these effects: STPEs promoted the sense that life is meaningful and that people and the world are benevolent, which in turn increased participants' spirituality (*Van Cappellen et al., 2013*).

STPEs in the Religious Context

Initial evidence, reviewed above, suggests that at least some STPEs promote religious and spiritual beliefs. I now turn to the other direction of causality, that is, religious/spiritual beliefs and practices promote the experience of STPEs. Several correlational studies have suggested that religious and spiritual individuals report greater frequency of positive emotions (for a review see *Smith, Ortiz, Wiggins, Bernard, & Dalen, 2012*) and STPEs especially such as gratitude (*Emmons & Kneetzel, 2005*; but see *Kraus, Desmond, & Palmer, 2015; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002*). *Kim-Prieto and Diener (2009)* showed that Christians, in comparison to other major religions, experience love more frequently and also find love more desirable. In the same study, Christians felt happiness, love, and gratitude with greater frequency than other groups and considered these positive emotions to be more desirable than negative emotions or pride.

Multiple elements of religion and spirituality may explain the higher prevalence of positive emotions, and especially STPEs, among religious and spiritual individuals. Religious and mystical

experiences are often accompanied by intense positive emotions such as joy, peace, awe, reverence (Hardy, 1979; Hay, 1982), and a strong phenomenological experience of connection to others. Meditation and prayer have also been found to promote the experience of various positive emotions (Hood, 2005; Krause & Wulff, 2005). Using longitudinal designs, prayer has been shown to increase gratitude (Lambert, Fincham, Braithwaite, Graham, & Beach, 2009), and meditation to increase positive emotions and especially STPEs (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Van Cappellen, Way, Isgett, & Fredrickson, 2016). Moreover, many aspects of the traditional Christian ritual, Sunday service, support the emergence of STPEs; for example, the monumental architecture of churches elicits awe (Joye & Verpooten, 2013). Experiencing the Sunday service as a collective and coordinated activity engenders a strong feeling of group identity and encourages the communication of pleasure and positive emotions (Cross & Morley, 2008). Within the United States, music is another consistent feature of contemporary religious services (Chaves, Konieczny, Beyerlein, & Barman, 1999) that can bring joy and peacefulness. For example, in Pentecostal churches, music is used to facilitate religious experience (Miller & Strongman, 2002). Music can spark a strong positive emotional response that, when intensified through the social aspects of the ritual, can lead to ecstasy (Penman & Becker, 2009). Finally, religious practices, simply by rendering salient one's religious identity, may elicit positive emotions that are valued by the religious group. In an interesting study by Kim-Prieto and Diener (2009), manipulating religious salience (asking participants to indicate their religious affiliation at the beginning of the study) made Christian participants report feeling more love than those whose religious identity had not been activated.

Religious Emotions?

Because STPEs are frequently reported in religious contexts (e.g., rituals) and experiences, some authors have labeled these positive emotions as religious emotions (Arnold, 1960; Emmons, 2005; Riis & Woodhead, 2010). Emmons (2005) enumerates five characteristics of religious emotions. These emotions are more prevalent (a) within a religious setting (e.g., in a church), (b) during religious or spiritual practices (e.g., during prayer or meditation), or (c) among people who self-identify as religious or spiritual. These emotions are also (d) traditionally valued and prescribed by the religious and spiritual institutions and are (e) felt when people interpret their circumstances through a sacred lens. Although the authors recognize that religious emotions can be experienced in a secular context and by nonreligious people, the "religious" label introduces unnecessary confusion between secular emotions and the religious domain. It overemphasizes the intimacy between emotion and religion, which consequently seems natural instead of worth investigating. For instance, the experience of awe caused by a picture or landscape does not have a religious character per se, until a specific individual ascribes the religious character to it. However, it is true that STPEs are particularly prevalent in religion, possibly serving specific functions for adherents' well-being, prosociality, and reinforcement of shared beliefs. Another interesting possibility is that certain contexts (such as the religious context) and individual differences (such as being religious/spiritual) may magnify the experience of secular STPEs

and their related benefits. Future studies should test whether one's interpretation of a positive experience (e.g., appraising one's positive experience through a spiritual lens) amplifies or modifies its effects. Finally, as it will become more evident in the following sections, positive emotions that are not typically considered as self-transcendent such as pride or joy, may be imbued with spiritual/religious meaning and acquire a self-transcendent quality. Empirical research should test whether virtually any positive emotion may become self-transcendent or "religious" when arising in a religious context, for a religious individual, or because of a religious interpretation. As a result, the STPEs listed in the previous section would always trigger other-focus, care, and meaning/spirituality, but other positive emotions would need a specific context to trigger these processes.

Possible functions. STPEs experienced in the context of religion appear to influence social cohesion and the reinforcement of shared beliefs, prosociality, and well-being. Durkheim's (1912) work sheds light on the social functions of emotions experienced in collective rituals, including religious rituals. Any expression of emotion among participants of a collective ritual vividly elicits analogous feelings in people around them. A reciprocal stimulation of emotion follows, leading to an "emotional effervescence." These emotions, felt collectively and magnified by other ritual components (e.g., movement synchrony), are conducive to a state of emotional communion in which participants experience unity and similarity. This leads to greater endorsement of the group's beliefs and values. Durkheim's theory has recently received empirical support in a series of studies investigating these processes in various collective rituals (Páez, Rimé, Basabe, Włodarczyk, & Zumeta, 2015). Given that STPEs promote other-focus and care, one interesting possibility is that STPEs magnify the effects of social communion when experienced in a collective religious ritual. This same hypothesis applies to STPEs' effects on religious and spiritual beliefs. STPEs appear to reinforce beliefs directly (e.g., Saroglou et al., 2008) and, as a result, they may play a critical role in the reinforcement of beliefs and values which are elicited and intensified in religious rituals.

STPEs may also function to promote prosociality and cooperation outside of the church community. In separate lines of research, STPEs and religious participation have both been related to prosociality (e.g., Saroglou, 2012; although restricted to nonvalue threatening outgroups). The fact that religion, through assorted means (e.g., architecture, collective and synchronous practices, music), powerfully evokes positive emotions may, at least partially, explain why religion is related to prosociality (Van Cappellen & Rimé, 2014). We tested this idea in a cross-sectional study of churchgoers, by distributing questionnaires directly after Sunday mass in 20 different parishes. We inquired about their experience of three dimensions of the religious ritual: social (social cohesion), emotional (positive emotions), and cognitive (sense of understanding of faith and meaning). We also administered a projective measure of prosociality, that is, whether participants spontaneously report wanting to share winnings from the lottery (Van Cappellen, Saroglou, & Toth-Gauthier, 2016). Results showed that the social aspect of religion (i.e., feeling part of a big family) and the social, positive emotion, love, explained the observed relation between religiosity and altruistic giving. In a cross-sectional study with a sample of Hong Kong Chinese Christian adolescents, similar results were found specifically for gratitude

(Li & Chow, 2015). In that study, the relation between spirituality and self-reported peer-helping behaviors was mediated by dispositional gratitude. Other research has suggested that religious gratitude, or gratitude toward God, might be even more predictive of well-being than general gratitude for highly religious individuals (Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Cohen, Galler, & Krumrei, 2011). Finally, dispositional compassion also appears to mediate the relation between spirituality (but not religiosity) and various tasks measuring prosociality and altruism (Saslow et al., 2013).

Finally, STPEs experienced within the context of Sunday mass may also partially account for the relationship between religion/spirituality and health. Again, STPEs and spirituality or religious participation have both been shown as separately related to well-being (e.g., Cohen & Pressman, 2006; Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). However, very little research has investigated STPEs as one mechanism through which religion/spirituality promote well-being. Using the same dataset of churchgoers, we found that positive emotions felt during Sunday mass independently predicted the relation between religiosity and well-being (indexed as optimism and life satisfaction) beyond the effects of experienced social cohesion. In another study, within a sample of adults interested in meditation, positive emotions also explained the relation between spirituality and well-being. Critically, in both studies, STPEs, but not other positive emotions, were the type of positive emotions that brought about the most benefits in term of well-being (Van Cappellen, Toth-Gauthier, Saroglou, & Fredrickson, 2016). STPEs may also explain the relation between religion/spirituality and indicators of health. Indeed, in a sample of asymptomatic heart failure patients, the extent to which participants experienced spiritual well-being in the last 2 weeks predicted gratitude levels, which in turn predicted indicators of health such as depression or sleep quality (Mills et al., 2015).

In sum, positive emotions are not only pleasant correlates of religious and spiritual practices; they are also implicated in building social cohesion and reinforcing shared beliefs. At the individual level, they build resources that benefit the self and the greater good. Religious and spiritual practices appear to provide a particularly potent context to elicit such emotions and reap their benefits.

Judeo-Christian Biblical Roots

General Consideration on the Study of Positive Emotions in Biblical Texts

Biblical scholars have only recently begun to study emotions. Emotions were, for a long time, deemed not worthy of attention because they were not recognized as a serious subject of inquiry. Moreover, biblical texts were not written with the intention of educating the reader on emotions (Gereboff, 2008). Concerning the study of positive emotions, even within psychology, early inquiry involved negative emotions only. It was not until the end of the 20th century when researchers became interested in positive emotion. Within biblical studies, the same tendency to focus on negative emotions is observed.

One of the goals of the present article is to present and discuss what a particular religious tradition teaches about self-transcendent positive emotions. The approach I am taking focuses on the construction of positive emotions in Christian foundational texts, the

Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. To discuss how positive emotions have been presented differently across history or within different Christian religious movements is beyond the scope of the present work.

To my knowledge, there is no study on self-transcendent positive emotions (as understood by psychologists) in the Hebrew Bible or New Testament. This might be due to the fact that emotions such as awe, admiration, or gratitude do not have an exact translation in Hebrew or Greek. Indeed, our current typology of emotions is not directly translatable or found in other languages or cultures. Therefore, studying emotions in the Bible often requires more than a simple study of a translation or a search by keywords. For example, in a very common English translation of the Bible, the New King James Version, awe, admiration, or even gratitude appear much less frequently than joy.

Given the lack of studies on STPEs, I chose to report here the results of my own research on awe and gratitude (vs. pride for contrast) in the Hebrew Bible, as well as the research on joy in the Bible. As discussed earlier, joy is not typically considered as an STPE and the reader may be surprised to see it presented here. However, it is one of the most common positive emotions in the Bible and one of the few ones that has received attention from biblical scholars. Importantly, as it will be exemplified below, joy's conceptualization in the Bible seems to include elements of self-transcendence that psychologists should better appreciate in future work.

Hebrew Bible

In this section, I rely mostly on my own research of awe, pride, gratitude, and joy in the Hebrew Bible and particularly in the book of Psalms (Van Cappellen, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2014). Working in Biblical Hebrew, I have been looking specifically at how emotions are constructed in different Bible narratives. I have scrutinized the stories and asked questions such as, what are the antecedents and consequences of a character's affective state how does the character interpret a specific emotional elicitor, and how does it modify the character's behavior, most of the time in reference to his or her relation to God?

One of the most common positive emotions found in the Hebrew Bible is joy. However, there are many Hebrew terms from which *joy* or *to rejoice* were translated. Do all of these Hebrew words designate the same emotion, or are some nuances lost through the uniform translation "to rejoice?" Do the emotions admiration and gratitude really occur so rarely? These questions reveal the difficulty in translating emotion terms from Hebrew to English. There seems to be a basic difference between English and Biblical Hebrew. English tends to organize emotions around subjective feelings (e.g., joy, fear, sadness). Biblical Hebrew tends to put less emphasis on the subjective feeling and more on the outward expression of the emotion, or in modern terms, its embodiment. The two languages emphasize different aspects of what an emotion is. When searching for the different Hebrew terms for *to rejoice*, a common theme across the dictionaries and lexicons is that the verbs may not specifically refer to the subjective feeling of joy, but instead to its visible, audible, and physical expression. Some researchers (e.g., Vanoni, 2001) have even claimed that some terms commonly translated by an emotion word actually

refer to a posture or a behavior. For example, regarding joy, Ruprecht (1997) wrote,

In Hebrew, joy does not primarily mean a feeling, an emotion, or an attitude, but joy visibly expressed, i.e., a congregational act. Now, because options for the verbal and gestural expression of joy are highly varied, one has difficulty precisely translating many Hebrew terms.

Other researchers studying positive emotions in various biblical texts echo this conclusion. According to Muffs (1992) and Anderson (1991), researchers have approached the Hebrew Bible with the preconception, influenced by our Western culture, that emotions are, first and foremost, internal feelings. Therefore, researchers have failed to take into account and fully appreciate the behavioral component of emotions. Muffs (1992), in his research on love and joy in biblical texts related to the law, found that a greater emphasis is placed on will than on internal feelings. “To do” an emotion is of utmost importance and from action an internal feeling arises. In my research on pride in the Psalms (Van Cappellen, 2011), I found that the body is commonly incorporated in descriptions of the emotion (e.g., to lift up the head). Even in English translations, if the emotion gratitude is not frequent, praise—a related behavior—is very much present. This difference between biblical Hebrew and English is an important key in understanding emotions in the Hebrew Bible. It explains why a search using emotion keywords fails to fully capture the emotional life depicted in the Hebrew Bible.

Within the biblical texts themselves, two implications arise from the greater emphasis on the visible expression of an emotion. First, by manifesting an emotion (instead of keeping it private in one’s mind) others can recognize what is happening. In the Hebrew bible, it seems important that emotions are acted and communicated toward the community and toward God. By modulating voice, posture, behaviors, or facial expressions, emotions indicate status and attitudes that are relevant to the community as a whole. Second, expressions of positive emotions influence people nearby and facilitate affect contagion. The social sharing and spreading of positive emotions is central to the Psalms, for example, where the joy of an individual (Ps. 1) becomes the joy of all the creation (Ps. 150).

I now discuss some specific positive emotions that have a prominent place in the Hebrew Bible, that is, joy, awe/fear of God, pride/gratitude, and describe the contexts in which these emotions arise.

Joy. Using dictionaries and lexicons to look at the Hebrew terms for joy quickly reveals the variety of contexts in which joy appears (Botterweck & Ringren, 1974-2006; Westermann, 1997). Many different people rejoice in the Hebrew Bible: kings, the people of God, the nations, the young, and the old. Beyond people, all of creation is also taking part in this rejoicing, for example, nature, earth, and the stars. Even the wicked and evil rejoice, often at the expense of the righteous. Finally, even God is depicted as rejoicing from his works or in response to his people. The reasons why people rejoice are diverse. Joy is derived from wine, banquets, beauty, childbirth, and so forth; however, the vast majority of situations involve God in some way. God himself, his acts of salvation, his royalty, his creation, his judgments, and his covenant with his people all are causes of joy. Across the Hebrew Bible, joy is expressed loudly, accompanied by music, songs, clapping, or

shouts. The Bible is also very realistic; joy is not present at all times and for everybody. In the Psalms for example, some wild oscillations occur between despair/sadness and success/joy. Remembering God’s past actions for his people is a source of joy and gratitude, even when the current circumstances are not good. People do not live in a long-lasting state of joy, although they long for it.

Awe/fear of god. Awe as a mixed emotion, between fear and fascination (Otto, 1917/1958), is represented by the term *yr’*. This term *yr’* is central to the Hebrew Bible and to the affective experience in the encounter of God. Its primary meaning is “to fear something or someone” (Gruber, 1990). It appears in the highly frequent expression “fear of God.” Again, fear or awe of God designates more than an emotion. It encompasses the right attitude to have concerning God, especially regarding obedience to the law and worship practices (Becker, 1965). As an emotion, a closer look at the texts where *yr’* is experienced toward God reveals that *yr’* also appears in contexts that do not suggest a fearful reaction (Van Cappellen, 2014). In Exodus 14:31 for example, the people “fear” God but subsequently believe in him and praise him. In this and other texts, typical fearful behaviors (e.g., flight response) are not to be found, suggesting that *yr’* might represent a more complex emotion.

Pride/gratitude. I contrast pride and gratitude because they present opposite patterns of attribution: for pride, good outcomes are typically attributed to the self (self-focus) when for gratitude they are attributed to the good action of someone else (other-focus). In Van Cappellen (2012b) I studied the emotion of pride in the Psalms and was curious to see whether pride is always presented in a negative way. Descriptions of the proud, those whose long-term attitude, more than a transient state, is to be proud, appear to be very negative. However, focusing on pride as a transient state, I found descriptions of success and achievement and related emotion of pride that were not condemned or did not lead to negative outcomes (e.g., Psa 18: 33–51; Psa 34: 3–4). Interestingly, in these instances, pride was not only described as a self-focus emotion, but it was paired with the recognition of God’s help in achieving the good outcome, which is a self-transcendent thought. The proud character is described as giving internal and external (to God) attributions for his or her success. By relativizing the emphasis on the self, these instances of pride can be conducive to other-focus emotions and behaviors such as gratitude toward God, praising God, and wanting to share one’s positive emotion with the community.

New Testament

The preeminence of positive emotions within the New Testament is significant and yet is less studied in contrast to Christ’s pain and suffering and the negative emotions associated with his life and the lives of his followers. Just like for the Hebrew bible, focused study on specific positive emotions is uncommon in contemporary theology (Crisp, 2015). The primary focus of this section will be on of the emotion of joy, one of the most frequent positive emotions in the New Testament. I note that other positive emotions such as love, awe, and gratitude, appear in close connection to joy. For example, love toward God is one of the precursors of joy and is therefore other-focused. Love and joy are also sometimes used interchangeably. Gratitude is closely linked to

joy as well, and acts of praise and celebration often follow or coincide with depictions of joy.

As in the Hebrew Bible, joy is felt by a variety of people as well as by Jesus and God. Joy is often in direct correlation to the physical presence of God, that is, Jesus, or bounties of God. Joy is not presented as self-generated, or as able to be created out of one's own effort (Wright, 2015). Instead, joy is passed to the people and is rooted in the joy of God (Crisp, 2015). That people often feel joy "in" God is inherently other-focus. God rejoices in the repentance and salvation of the people (Thompson, 2015). There is also a heavenly joy, shared by God with humanity (Wright, 2015). Joy is often outwardly and communally expressed. Not only an emotion, joy is also a willed state of being; joy is a way of looking at the world and relating to others. Paul, for example, commands the people to rejoice and share in joy and gratitude (Thompson, 2015).

Compared to the Hebrew Bible, New Testament joy is more profoundly intertwined with negativity. For example, in the Beatitudes, the afflicted and suffering are described as blessed and happy. The typical circumstances in which one may expect sadness to be elicited, may instead, or in addition, elicit joy. For example, in the biblical narrative, Paul is imprisoned yet he feels joy and tells the people to rejoice in unity, faith, and in God. Pain experienced for the purpose of spiritual progress is often transformed into joy (Wright, 2015). Joy in God has the power to override internal suffering (Thompson, 2015). Moreover, the image of the cross, the most prominent symbol for Christianity, symbolizes the pain and suffering of Christ, yet forecasts the resurrection and the joy associated with it. Among medieval Christian mystical practices of asceticism, meditation on the suffering of Christ is a spiritual practice that fuses the experience of pain, both physical and emotional, with the experience of love and joy in God. Birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus are all motifs for joy in Christian communities. Thompson (2015) also discusses joy as independent of suffering, or joy notwithstanding the circumstances of life. Even in the midst of distress, joy is possible for one who has resilient faith in God's presence now and trust that in the future, God will remove his or her suffering.

The temporality of joy in the New Testament is also different than in the Hebrew Bible. Joy in the New Testament is distinct with the addition of the coming of Jesus Christ. The Jews experience joy in the form of hope for the coming Messiah, or hope in a future good, whereas the joy presented in the New Testament is often understood to be experienced in the now. Indeed, when God sends and saves Jesus, an initial fulfillment of the messianic hope is experienced in the present (Thompson, 2015). God's kingdom is both a present reality and a future promise. Therefore, in addition to joy itself, there is also hope and trust for what is to come, that is, the kingdom of God. Finally, New Testament joy also seems to have a long-lasting quality. Instead of arising as a transient burst of emotion, joy is a lasting component of living a life in God. This aspect may be surprising to affective scientists who think of emotions as brief responses to a change in the environment. However, in the New Testament joy can also persist and can become everlasting (Thompson, 2015). Finally, joy is a human experience, but because of its long-lasting nature, and its depiction as being a shared gift from God, it seems to be understood as having an elevated station, distinguishing it from other more transient positive emotions.

Discussion

STPEs are characterized by other-focus appraisals and the promotion of care and prosociality (Haidt, 2003). Here, I present the argument that a third characteristic exists, that STPEs support one's spiritual and religious beliefs salient, and the process of finding meaning in life (Van Cappellen & Rimé, 2014). The psychological and biblical studies reviewed here leads to three conclusions and suggestions to move research on STPEs forward.

First, there are no rigid boundaries between STPEs and non-STPEs; each positive emotion is related, to a greater or lesser degree, to each of the STPEs characteristics. As is evident from biblical studies, the context in which positive emotions occur may tip an emotion toward self-transcendence. Indeed, emotions in the Bible are presented in the context of the relationship between the people and their God and this context appears to facilitate the interpretation of emotional experiences in sacred terms. Initial exploration of emotions in the Bible suggests that many instances of positive emotions are to some extent related to God, although there are definitely cases where positive emotions are not self-transcendent (e.g., amusement and many cases of pride). These emotions are other-focused, often leading to praise toward God and invitations for the community to share in the joy. Future empirical studies should test whether certain contexts (such as the religious context) and individual differences (such as being religious/spiritual) modify one's interpretation of a positive experience (e.g., appraising one's positive experience through a spiritual lens). This could have different implications for STPEs or other positive emotions. In the case of STPEs, a sacred interpretation may amplify their effects, or in the case of other positive emotions a sacred interpretation may imbue them with self-transcendence. In other words, a future research question should be: can any positive emotion be experienced as self-transcendent if one imbues the good circumstance with spiritual/religious meaning? In the Hebrew Bible, we saw for example that even a prototypical self-focused emotion, pride, could be experienced along gratitude and share some self-transcendent qualities.

Second, more research is needed to investigate whether joy should be considered a STPEs. The abundance of joy in the Bible contrasts with its relative absence from psychology research on STPEs. In the Bible, joy arises from mundane positive events as well as from manifestations of God. The variety of eliciting situations seems to suggest that *joy* is sometimes used more as an umbrella term for any positive feeling than as a specific positive emotion. However, this does not imply that joy cannot be its own specific emotion, different from amusement or gratitude. Indeed, biblical research highlights some elements that appear at the core of experiencing joy and are worth investigating empirically. First, joy is experienced communally and is visibly expressed. Second, compared to typical definitions of joy in psychology, the emphasis on the self seems to be less central and is outweighed by the eliciting circumstances. Third, in a religious context, joy is often associated with the recognition of God's actions in the world and with the expression of gratitude, all of which are self-transcendent processes. Future research in psychology should study the distinctive appraisals of joy compared to other related positive emotions and find whether it can be considered as an STPE as some biblical texts suggest.

Third, the study of positive emotions in the Bible uncovered additional questions for the psychology of STPEs. For example, the Hebrew Bible emphasizes the overt expression of an emotion and its embodiment. This aspect is important because emotions are also experienced in community where they need to be recognized. Research in psychology may want to better appreciate the role played by these factors in the phenomenological experience of STPEs. In addition, biblical joy was found to be sometimes profoundly connected with despair and suffering. Research in psychology may want to further investigate the role of negative emotions in the quality and intensity of positive emotions. For example, how characteristic is the presence of negativity in STPEs? Are STPEs inherently mixed emotions? Furthermore, future research should look at the temporal dynamics of negative emotions and STPEs. One possibility, awaiting direct testing, is that when joy follows a negative emotion (e.g., sadness or despair) its experience will be more intense and is more likely to be interpreted in sacred terms (e.g., as grace or demonstration of God's presence in the world).

In closing, STPEs are not religious or sacred emotions per se. They can be experienced as fully secular and by all people, independent of their religious inclinations. For all, they appear to focus our attention beyond the self and to facilitate other-focus, care, and to some extent meaning. Yet, these emotions are prevalent in religious settings where they are theorized to serve important functions for the adherents in terms of well-being, prosociality, or reinforcement of shared beliefs. Positive emotions are also present in the Bible, although the state of current research prevents us from discussing specific positive emotions in as much detail as in psychology. Still, the knowledge accrued around joy suggests that it can be experienced as self-transcendent, usually when the experience is related to the recognition of God. This biblical research also sheds light on certain aspects of emotions that would merit further consideration in empirical psychological research, such as positive emotions' communal and behavioral/expressive aspects.

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