Religious Struggle and Psychological Well-Being: The Mediating Role of Religious Support and Meaning Making

Beata Zarzycka [1],*[ID]**, Anna Tychmanowicz** [2][ID] **and Dariusz Krok** [3][ID]

1   Institute of Psychology, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, 20-950 Lublin, Poland
2   Institute of Psychology, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, 20-080 Lublin, Poland;
     anna.tychmanowicz@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl
3   Institute of Psychology, Opole University, 45-052 Opole, Poland; dkrok@uni.opole.pl
*   Correspondence: zarzycka@kul.pl

Abstract: Although a variety of studies have found robust links between religious/spiritual (r/s) struggle and poorer well-being, only a few have examined the means by which r/s struggle affects mental well-being. The present paper aims to examine religious support and meaning making as mediators of the relationship between r/s struggle and well-being. The study included 226 adults, 108 women and 118 men, aged between 17 and 78 years. We applied the Religious and Spiritual Struggle Scale, Religious Support Scale, Meaning Making Scale, and Psychological Well-Being Scale. The results demonstrated that both religious support and meaning making were mediators in the relationship between r/s struggles and well-being. During moral or demonic struggles, many people reportedly feel supported by their religion, make meaning based on these positive religious experiences, and in turn experience greater well-being. Conversely, during divine, ultimate meaning, and interpersonal struggles people may feel like God does not support them, which may lead to difficulties reframing their religious experience, and adversely influence well-being. The findings from this study underscore the multifaceted character of r/s struggle: during different types of r/s struggle people may feel that religion is a source of support for them or, by contrast, they may feel deprived of religious support, which can lead to an increase or decrease of well-being, respectively.

Keywords: religious struggle; spiritual struggle; religious support; well-being

1. Introduction

Religion is a source of support and consolation for many people as well as a predictor of mental health and personal adjustment (Fatima et al. 2018; Koenig et al. 2012; Park and Slattery 2013). A vast majority of research has confirmed negative correlations between religiosity and depression and anxiety (Park and Slattery 2013) and positive correlations between religiosity and the sense of happiness, well-being, and satisfaction with life (Bradshaw and Kent 2018). However, religion does not always bring comfort, and it also has the potential for strain and internal conflicts. When some persons think that adverse events that happen in their life are unjust, they may blame God, distrust God or feel angry with God (Exline et al. 2011). Some people are hurt by members of their religious community or clergy (Krause et al. 2000). There are also people who try to live according to their religious faith but feel tension because they cannot satisfy these demands. Some individuals believe that they are victims of supernatural forces (Exline 2013). Researchers have coined the term religious or spiritual (r/s) struggle to define a wide range of phenomena, all marked by strains and conflicts related to religion or spirituality (Exline 2013).

Empirical evidence from diverse studies including non-clinical and clinical samples has supported the association of r/s struggle with poor mental health and low well-being (Exline et al. 2015; Exline et al. 2011). However, the mechanisms responsible for these processes have not been profoundly investigated (Ellison et al. 2013; Zarzycka 2017). Our study was designed to examine whether religious support and meaning making can explain the relationship between r/s struggle and psychological well-being.

1.1. Religious and Spiritual Struggle and Well-Being

R/s struggles can be characterized as tension, strain, and conflicts about sacred matters. Exline and colleagues (Exline et al. 2014; Stauner et al. 2016) distinguished six types of r/s struggle: divine struggle involves negative emotions centered on beliefs about God or a perceived relationship with God; demonic struggle involves concerns that the devil or evil spirits are attacking an individual or causing negative events; interpersonal struggle involves concerns about negative experiences with religious people or institutions; moral struggle involves wrestling with attempts to follow moral principles and feelings of worry or guilt about perceived offenses committed; ultimate meaning struggle involves concerns about whether one's life has a deeper purpose; and religious doubt involves feeling uncertain about religious beliefs. Thus, r/s struggles may refer directly to supernatural agents (e.g., the devil, the divine). They may be intrapsychic and encompass one's own thoughts, experiences, or actions (e.g., the sense of guilt or religion-related doubts). Finally, struggles may be interpersonal and encompass negative experiences related to clergy, religious institutions, or the other faithful.

The vast majority of empirical data suggest that r/s struggle is related to poor mental health (see for a review Exline 2013; Zarzycka 2017). These trends were confirmed by meta-analyses and by studies conducted in non-clinical and clinical samples. For example, a meta-analysis of 49 studies demonstrated positive associations between r/s struggle and social dysfunctions, depression, negative mood, anxiety, and a sense of guilt (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005). Similar relationships were reported in a meta-analysis of 147 studies (98,975 respondents) (Smith et al. 2003). Studies conducted in non-clinical samples encompassed students (Bryant and Astin 2008), adults (Nielsen 1998), and Presbyterian ministers (Pargament et al. 2001), as well as representatives of various religious traditions: Islam (Abu-Raiya et al. 2015), Judaism (Rosmarin et al. 2009) and Christianity (Krause et al. 1998). Although research has repeatedly demonstrated associations between r/s struggle and poor mental health, the findings primarily included r/s struggle as a general category or as negative religious coping (Ano and Pargament 2013; Exline et al. 2014). Given that r/s struggle covers a wide range of phenomena, assessing specific types of r/s struggle in relation to well-being would be more informative than assessing a general category (Zarzycka 2017).

As far as specific types of r/s struggle are concerned, empirical evidence from diverse studies including clinical and non-clinical samples support the negative association of divine struggle with well-being (Exline et al. 2015). In recent years, research has also included ultimate meaning (Wilt et al. 2018). In light of this literature review, the first objective of the present study was formulated to assess the specific roles of divine, demonic, moral, ultimate meaning, interpersonal, and doubt struggles in predicting psychological well-being (Hypothesis 1).

1.2. Indirect Relations between R/s Struggle and Well-Being

The question that follows is how the r/s struggle–well-being link can be explained. Park and Slattery (2013, p. 547) developed a conceptual model of the mediational pathways through which various dimensions of religiousness or spirituality may help or hinder mental health. These potential mediators include both religious and nonreligious factors. Smith (2003) also claimed that religiosity exerts its beneficial effects on well-being through moral, psychological, and social factors. Explaining the religiosity–well-being link by religious or spiritual factors has been known as the nonreductionist approach, whereas explaining it by the nonreligious factors has been known as the reductionist approach (Fatima et al. 2018).

We expected that r/s struggle would affect psychological well–being both by religious and nonreligious factors. Some studies have already confirmed this expectation, identifying varied, often non-intuitive, ways in which struggling with God affects mental health. Among religious factors, concerns about personal mortality mediated the r/s struggle–depression link in terminally ill congestive heart failure patients (Edmondson et al. 2008). Spiritual growth has been identified as a mediator in the relationship between moral and demonic struggles with satisfaction with life; spiritual decline was a mediator in the relationship between demonic, moral, and interpersonal struggles with anxiety. Among nonreligious factors, internal dialogues mediated the r/s struggles–well-being link (Zarzycka and Puchalska-Wasyl 2019), whereas meaning making was a mediator in the r/s doubt struggle–satisfaction with life link (Zarzycka and Zietek 2019).

Guided by this framework, we decided to examine a meditational model assessing whether religious support and meaning making might explain the r/s struggle–well-being link. Below, we described these two mediators and our expectations concerning why and how they might explain this r/s struggle–well-being link.

1.3. Religious Support as a Potential Mediator

One of the most recognizable benefits to those involved in religion is the support that comes with that involvement. Religious support differs from other forms of social support, in particular by the fact that there is a consistent framework for understanding meaning of life based on religious values (Park and Slattery 2013). R/s struggles are not experienced in isolation from the broader perspective of the general religiosity and support that a religious person derives from his or her relationship with God. Additionally, during r/s struggle people may be especially likely to seek out support from their religion (e.g., asking God or religious people to support them in their struggle).

The literature has described divine, ultimate meaning, and interpersonal struggles as negative correlates of religious involvement (Exline et al. 2014; Zarzycka et al. 2018). Additionally, divine struggle was reported as a predictor of abandoning religious beliefs (Novotni and Petersen 2001). On the other hand, moral and demonic struggles have been described as positive correlates of religious involvement (Exline et al. 2014; Zarzycka 2017). The research has shown that religiosity strengthens people's attempts to follow moral principles as well as their feelings of remorse about misdeeds they perceive themselves to have committed (Ward and King 2018). Demonic struggle was associated with positive experiences associated with God (Beck and Taylor 2008), serving a defensive function, and helping people maintain faith by protecting people's positive images of God (Exline 2013). Thus, during divine, ultimate meaning, and interpersonal struggles, people might feel that God is not their ally, while they might feel supported by God when they make an effort to satisfy moral requirements of their religion or when they resist temptations from evil spirits. Therefore, we hypothesized that divine, interpersonal, and ultimate meaning struggle would be negatively associated with religious support. We also hypothesized that moral and demonic struggle would be positively associated with religious support. As an exploratory part of our study, we hope to examine religious doubt struggle as a predictor of well-being, with religious social support as a mediating variable. It was more difficult to predict the relationships between doubt struggle with religious social support, as they have shown different patterns of associations with religiosity (Exline et al. 2014). Religious support strengthens psychological well-being (Moreira-Almeida et al. 2006) and has consistently been associated with improved overall functioning (Fiala et al. 2002).

1.4. Meaning Making as a Potential Mediator

Meaning plays a significant role in human life and mental health, as it provides individuals with a sense of purpose and goals. Its function seems especially important in the face of existential questions, which need to be addressed by people in the context of difficult moments. Research has demonstrated that stressful situations typically prompt individuals to more explicitly consider and rely on their meaning systems, which become a vital source of orientation and significance (Park 2013). People

struggle to understand what is happening to them, how they can regain a sense of control, restore their sense of the world as fair and good, and feel protected and safe.

For many people, religion is at the core of their meaning systems, influences their beliefs about the self, the world, and their interaction; it provides a framework through which knowledge and experience can be interpreted. R/s struggles are sometimes severe enough that they may include a shaken system of ultimate beliefs (Abu-Raiya et al. 2016). Thus, when shaken spiritually, many people may be especially likely to engage in meaning making which will enable them to come to see or understand the situation in a different way and to review or reform their beliefs and goals in order to regain consistency among them. A meaning system is essential in providing a sense of mastery or control, which is strongly related to well-being.

1.5. The Current Study

The objectives of this study are twofold: (1) to assess the direct relations of divine, demonic, moral, ultimate meaning, interpersonal, and doubt struggles with psychological well-being (PWB) and (2) to assess whether religious support and meaning making mediate the r/s struggles–well-being link. Religious support and meaning making were tested as serial mediators in the relationship between r/s struggle with well-being. We expected that r/s struggle and religious support might work in tandem, predicting meaning making as well as self-reported psychological well-being (Hypothesis 2). There are several reasons for this expectation. First, r/s struggles are not experienced in isolation from the broader perspective of religiousness and support that religious individuals derive from their faith. Second, the influence of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices on mental health operates largely through individuals' meaning systems. Third, most of the effects of religious variables on health are mediated through an individual's perceptions, responses, decisions, and behaviors (Park 2013). In accordance with the mediation hypothesis, we proposed to test six mediation models, in which the types of r/s struggle—divine, demonic, moral, ultimate meaning, interpersonal, and doubt—were sequentially examined as predictors of PWB. Religious support and meaning making were tested as mediators in these relationships.

The current study is unique for several reasons. First, initially many studies focused on r/s struggle as a general concept or as negative religious coping strategies rather than assessing specific types of r/s struggle, as has been assessed in the current study. Second, as far as specific types of r/s struggle have been concerned, a vast majority of research focused on divine struggle. Although, since Exline et al. (2014) published their Religious and Spiritual Struggle Scale, research in this area has expanded, mechanisms explaining the relationships between religious struggles and well-being are still unknown. Third, studies assessing the mediating role of meaning making (Zarzycka and Zietek 2019) have not assessed it simultaneously with religious support, as has been done in the current study. Thus, simultaneous assessment of these variables in a single model is likely to provide more comprehensive findings. Fourth, a majority of published studies in this field have used Western, mostly American, samples. Inasmuch as the field of psychology of religion is in a state of rapid growth, there is a need to use samples derived from countries with different cultural backgrounds to carry out cross-cultural comparison, and to test the generalizability of these results.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Respondents and Procedure

The study included 226 adults, 108 women and 118 men, aged between 17 and 78 years. The mean age was 27.68 years (SD = 12.51). All the participants were Caucasians with Polish nationality. Most participants were single (*n* = 173, 76.9%) and had a secondary school education (*n* = 179, 80.3%). All of them were Roman Catholics (*n* = 164, 72.6%). Students in the third year of the undergraduate psychology program at the first author's university collected data through a web survey. The students were awarded credit points for their involvement in the study. Informed consent was obtained

from all participants. No time constraints to complete the scales were imposed on the participants. The procedure was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Psychology at the first author's university.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Religious and Spiritual Struggle Scale (RSSS)

The RSSS is a 26-item instrument that consists of six scales measuring domains of religious and spiritual struggle: (1) Divine (e.g., *I felt as though God had let me down*); (2) Demonic (e.g., *I felt attacked by the devil or by evil spirits*); (3) Interpersonal (e.g., *I had conflicts with other people about religious/spiritual matters*); (4) Moral (e.g., *I wrestled with attempts to follow my moral principles*); (5) Religious Doubt (e.g., *I felt troubled by doubts or questions about religion or spirituality*); and (6) Ultimate Meaning (e.g., *I questioned whether life really matters*) (Exline et al. 2014). The instructions included the following prompt: "From time to time, people experience struggles, are worried about something, or have doubts related to religion and spirituality. With reference to the time span of the last month to today, please assess to what extent you went through the experiences described below." Then the participants rated the items using a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (*not at all/does not apply*) to 5 (*a great deal*). We used a Polish adaptation of the RSSS. The internal consistency of the RSSS subscales obtained in previous research ranged from $\alpha = 0.81$ to 0.93 (Zarzycka et al. 2018) and in this study ranged from $\alpha = 0.82$ to 0.94 (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between the variables included in the study.

	Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Divine	—								
2	Demonic	0.23 ***	—							
3	Moral	0.32 ***	0.42 ***	—						
4	Ultimate Meaning	0.45 ***	0.04	0.34 ***	—					
5	Interpersonal	0.41 ***	0.18 **	0.23 **	0.33 ***	—				
6	Doubt	0.60 ***	0.23 ***	0.46 ***	0.54 ***	0.44 ***	—			
7	Religious Support	−0.16 *	0.39 ***	0.26 ***	−0.29 ***	−0.33 ***	−0.08	—		
8	Meaning Making	−0.10	0.16 *	0.28 ***	−0.13 *	−0.02	0.13	0.34 ***	—	
9	Well-Being	−0.14 *	0.09	0.16 *	−0.18 **	−0.04	−0.04	0.27 ***	0.46 ***	—
	M	1.90	1.67	2.49	2.51	2.23	2.21	3.12	3.53	3.60
	SD	1.01	0.98	1.01	1.28	0.96	1.08	1.00	0.79	0.49
	α	0.91	0.94	0.83	0.92	0.82	0.87	0.91	0.83	0.78

Significance level: *** p 0.001; ** p 0.01; * p 0.05.

2.2.2. Polish Religious Support Scale (PRSS)

The PRSS (Zarzycka et al. forthcoming) is based on the Religious Support Scale (RSS; Fiala et al. 2002). It consists of three seven-item scales, measuring the participant's perception of support from sources that are relevant to a religious context—God (e.g., God cares about your life and situation), congregation (e.g., you feel appreciated by the members of a congregation), and the clergy (e.g., you can turn to the church leadership for advice when you have problems). The original RSS contained one reverse-scored item on each subscale to address response bias, but researchers (e.g., Lazar and Bjorck 2016; Yi and Bjorck 2014) have shown that this actually results in lower subscale reliabilities. Thus, all the items on the PRSS are rated on a five-point Likert response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with no reverse scoring. As such, higher scores on the PRSS indicate a higher degree of feeling religiously supported. The PRSS was translated and back-translated into Polish, and the factorial structure was assessed by entering the 21 items into a principal component analysis (PCA) with direct oblimin rotation. This PCA, combined with analysis of a scree plot, suggested the same three-factor solution, explaining 73% of total variance. Fiala et al. reported the internal consistency of the RSS total score as 0.91, and it was also 0.91 for the PRSS (Table 1).

2.2.3. The Meaning-Making Scale (MMS)

The MMS was used to measure participants' attempts to make meaning of adverse experiences (Abraham and Stein 2015). Theoretical concepts and empirical findings suggest that people engage in cognitive and emotional processing while attempting to understand the negative experiences they face. Thus, the meaning-making process consists of both cognitive and emotional aspects. The Meaning-Making Scale combines items to capture cognitive and emotional strategies of meaning making (Carver 1997). Participants reported how often they used each meaning-making strategy to deal with their adverse situation. Respondents rated items on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very often*). The MMS makes it possible to obtain a general result and results in two subscales: emotional processing (four items, e.g., *I take time to figure out what I'm really feeling*) and positive reframing (three items, e.g., *I look for something good in what is happening*). The total score was calculated as the arithmetic mean of answers to all items. The internal consistency of the MMS obtained in previous research was $\alpha = 0.81$ (Zarzycka and Zietek 2019) and in this study $\alpha = 0.83$ (Table 1).

2.2.4. Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS)

The PWBS is an 18-item instrument that measures six aspects of psychological well-being: personal growth, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance (Ryff 1989). Each aspect is represented by three items; example items for each domain are as follows: *I am not afraid to voice my opinions, even when they are in opposition to the opinions of most people* (autonomy); *In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live* (environmental mastery); *I like most aspects of my personality* (self-acceptance); *I have the sense that I have developed a lot as a person over time* (personal growth); *Most people see me as loving and affectionate* (positive relations); and *I have a sense of direction and purpose in life* (purpose in life). In the study, we used only the total score, which is a measure of overall well-being and is the mean of all the individual item scores. Response options were from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency of the PWBS obtained in previous research was $\alpha = 0.79$ (Karaś et al. 2013) and in this study $\alpha = 0.78$ (Table 1).

2.3. Statistical Methods

This study was designed cross-sectionally. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and alpha reliabilities) were calculated for all study variables. Second, to test the links between r/s struggle, religious support, meaning making, and well-being, correlational analyses were conducted. Finally, to examine whether the relationships between r/s struggle and well-being are mediated by religious support and meaning making, a series of mediation analyses was performed. Prior to testing the mediation models, raw scores were standardized on all variables ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). Six separate mediation models were tested to assess direct and indirect effects of divine, demonic, moral, ultimate meaning, interpersonal, and doubt struggles on well-being mediated through religious support and meaning making as two serial mediators. We performed all mediation analyses using SPSS's add-on Process, developed by Hayes (2018). Indirect effects and bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI 95%) were calculated using the bootstrapping procedure. Indirect effects were computed for each of the 5000 bootstrapped samples.

3. Results

3.1. Basic Associations: Religious and Spiritual Struggle, Religious Support, and Well-Being

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and Pearson bivariate correlations for all variables examined in the study.

Participants reported low scores on r/s struggles, which was in line with the results of other studies (Abu-Raiya et al. 2016; Zarzycka 2017). Regarding religious support, meaning making, and well-being, participants manifested relatively high scores on religious support and meaning making, and moderate scores on well-being. Three sets of correlational results are especially important for

the purpose of the study (Table 1). First, three out of six types of r/s struggles—divine, ultimate meaning, and interpersonal—had negative correlations with religious support. Two other types of r/s struggles—demonic and moral—had positive correlations with religious support. Second, ultimate meaning correlated negatively, while demonic and moral struggle correlated positively with meaning making. Third, divine and ultimate meaning struggle correlated negatively, while moral struggle correlated positively with well-being. Both religious support and meaning making correlated positively with well-being. There were also significant correlations between the RSSS subscales. Thus, we checked how serious the multicollinearity problem was. The tolerance index was lowest at 0.33 and the variance inflation factor (VIF) was highest at 3.01, which suggests that the multicollinearity problem was not serious in our model. Alpha reliability coefficients of all study variables were found to be good and between $\alpha = 1.78$ and 1.94.

3.2. Mediation Analyses: R/S Struggle–Religious Support–Meaning Making–Well-Being

To explain the r/s struggle–well-being link, we performed six mediation analyses in which divine, demonic, moral, interpersonal, ultimate meaning, and doubt struggles were tested as predictors of well-being. Religious support and meaning making were tested as serial mediators in the r/s struggles–well-being link. Using a serial multiple mediator model allowed us to investigate the direct and indirect effects of r/s struggles on well-being while modeling a process in which r/s struggles affect religious support, which in turn affects meaning making, and so forth, concluding with well-being as the final consequent (Hayes 2018).

The direct and indirect effects of moral and demonic struggle on well-being are presented in Figure 1. As Figure 1 illustrates, during demonic (1A) and moral struggle (1B), people reportedly feel supported by their religion, which may help them find meaning in their religious experience, and subsequently strengthen their well-being. The bootstrapped indirect effects of r/s struggle on well-being were as follows: demonic (IE = 0.05, 95% CI [0.024, 0.095]) and moral struggle (IE = 0.03, 95% CI [0.011, 0.0058]). In the case of moral struggle, the indirect effect struggle–meaning making–well-being was also significant (IE = 0.09, 95% CI [0.030, 0.153]), which suggests that some tend to make meaning when they wrestle with attempts to follow moral principles, which in turn may strengthen their well-being.
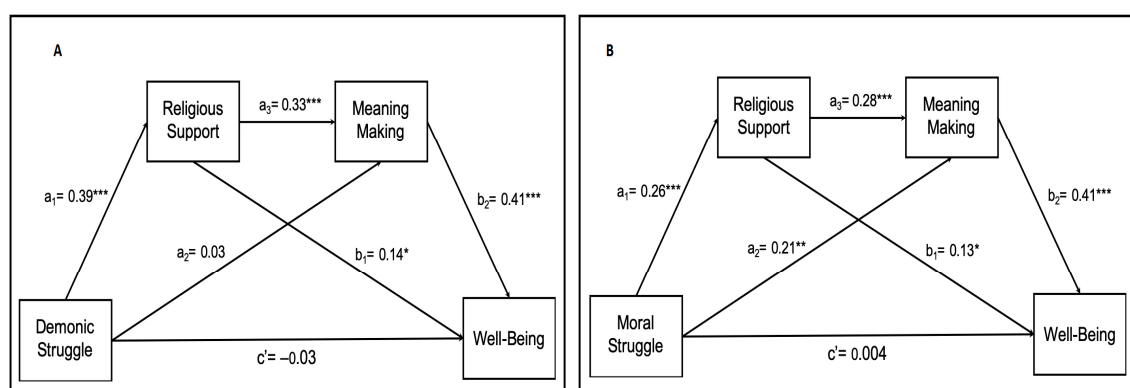

Figure 1. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationships between demonic (**A**) and moral (**B**) struggle and well-being as mediated by religious support and meaning making. Significance level: *** *p* 0.001; ** *p* 0.01; * *p* 0.05.

However, as Figure 2 illustrates, during divine (A), interpersonal (B), and ultimate meaning (C) struggles, people reportedly feel less support from their religion, which is linked to lower levels of meaning, and subsequently lower well-being. In other words, the greater the struggles in these areas, the less support individuals perceive from their religion, which in turn means that the whole chain of support–meaning–well-being is decreased as well. The bootstrapped indirect effects of r/s struggle on well-being were as follows: divine (IE = −0.02, 95% CI [−0.046, −0.001]), interpersonal (IE = −0.05,

95% CI [−0.086, −0.023]), and ultimate meaning struggle (IE = −0.04, 95% CI [−0.071, −0.015]). In the case of interpersonal struggle, the indirect effect struggle–religious support–well-being was also significant (IE = −0.04, 95% CI [−0.091, −0.001]), which suggests that when people have conflicts with religious people or institutions, they may feel unsupported by their religion, and low religious support correlated with well-being.
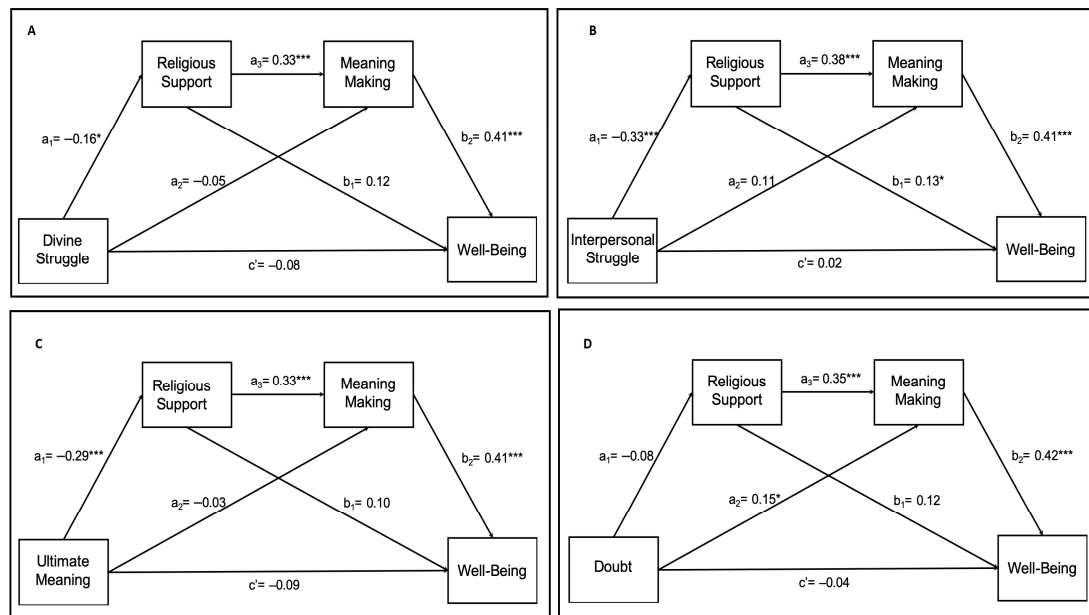

Figure 2. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationships between divine (**A**), interpersonal (**B**), ultimate meaning (**C**), and doubt (**D**) struggles and Well-Being as mediated by God, congregation, and clergy support. Significance level: *** *p* 0.001; * *p* 0.05.

In the case of religious doubts struggle, the indirect effect doubt–meaning making–well-being was significant (IE = 0.06, 95% CI [0.006, 0.120]). As Figure 2D illustrates, some people tend to make meaning when they wrestle with religious doubts, and positive meaning making correlated with improved well-being.

Each of the types of struggle tested was no longer a significant predictor of psychological well-being after controlling for the mediators, implying that paths from r/s struggle to PWB were mediated by religious support and meaning making.

4. Discussion

The objective of the current study was to assess the direct and indirect relationships between r/s struggle, religious support, meaning making, and well-being. Six types of r/s struggle were tested: divine, demonic, moral, ultimate meaning, interpersonal, and religious doubt. The average scores on the RSSS scale were found to be lower in comparison with the average scores on religious support, which is in line with the findings of other studies (e.g., Abu-Raiya et al. 2016; Zarzycka 2017). This indicates that faith seems to provide more support than strain.

The types of r/s struggle tested revealed different patterns of associations with religious support, meaning making, and well-being. Divine and ultimate meaning struggles were found to be negatively associated with religious support and well-being. Ultimate meaning struggle correlated negatively with meaning making. Interpersonal struggle correlated negatively with religious support. Demonic and moral struggles were found to be positively associated with religious support and meaning making, and moral struggle also correlated positively with well-being. Religious support and meaning making were confirmed as serial mediators in the r/s struggle–well-being link. More specifically, results from mediation analyses indicated: (1) similar patterns of mediation effects for divine, interpersonal, and

ultimate meaning struggles—during divine, interpersonal, and ultimate meaning struggles people reportedly do not feel supported by their religion, and have difficulty in cognitively reframing their religious experience, which was negatively correlated with well-being; (2) similar patterns of mediation effects for demonic and moral struggles—during demonic or moral struggles people reportedly feel supported by their religion, which may help them find meaning in their religious experience, and positive meaning making correlated with improved well-being; (3) a different pattern of mediation effect for religious doubt—meaning making was the only mediator of the religious doubt–well-being link.

4.1. Direct Relations between R/S Struggle and PWB

The first objective of the study was to assess the relationships between r/s struggle and well-being. The findings are noteworthy in that the present study has used specific types of r/s struggle rather than using r/s struggle as a general term. Although the present study found that different types of r/s struggle—divine, ultimate meaning, and moral struggles—were significant predictors of well-being, it is worth noting that divine and ultimate meaning struggles correlated with PWB negatively, whereas moral struggle correlated positively. These differences suggest the heterogeneity and versatility of the r/s struggle concept. The negative associations between divine and ultimate meaning struggles with well-being suggest that these types of r/s struggles may hold negative implications for psychological well-being. Thus, these findings should not come as too great a surprise given that divine and ultimate meaning struggles are sometimes severe enough to include a questioning of fundamental beliefs and one's world view (Abu-Raiya et al. 2016). Negative correlations between r/s struggle and well-being have been confirmed in previous studies (Exline et al. 2015; Exline and Martin 2005). The positive associations between moral struggle and well-being highlight the beneficial effect of moral struggle, which has been found in only a few studies (Abu-Raiya et al. 2016; Zarzycka and Zietek 2019). The present findings also add new evidence from the Polish, mostly Catholic population, on the r/s struggle–well-being link in light of the fact that the majority of the previous studies were conducted in Western, mostly American, samples.

4.2. Indirect Relations between R/S Struggle and Well-Being

A second objective of the study was to assess variables that may explain the r/s struggles–well-being links. As a first step in this direction, we turn our attention to religious support, which may be particularly relevant in the r/s struggle context, given the importance of faith to religious people and the faith-related strain they face. As a second step, we turn our attention to meaning making, because we expected that people attempt to understand their adverse experiences, and religion can provide a cognitive and interpretative framework to make sense of them (Park 2013).

Consistent with our prediction, the two variables—religious support and meaning making—mediated the relationships between r/s struggles and well-being, providing evidence both for the nonreductionist and reductionist approach. In line with the nonreductionist approach our findings suggest that the link between r/s struggle and well-being is mediated by religious support, whereas in line with the reductionist approach these findings suggest that this link is mediated by meaning making. Thus, our study provides support for the view that r/s struggle is an expression of both religious and more basic psychological processes (Abu-Raiya and Pargament 2015).

We may conclude that faith-related conflicts are experienced in the broader perspective of the support that religious people reportedly derive from their religion. However, r/s struggles may be a time of feeling abandoned by God, a time when one does not experience God's support; it may also be a time of feeling close to God and experiencing God's support, depending on the type of r/s struggle. Thus, the type of r/s struggle and the extent of religious support perceived might work in tandem to predict meaning making and well-being (Ladd and McIntosh 2008). We observed two ways in which r/s struggle and religious support might interplay predicting meaning making and well-being. First, based on the results presented here, God's support might not constitute a helpful resource for those individuals who are struggling with religious anger in their relationships with God (divine) or

concerns about not finding deep meaning in their life (ultimate meaning). Second, the results suggest that religious support might provide a helpful resource for those individuals who are struggling with attempts to follow moral principles or concerns that the devil is tempting or attacking them.

Divine struggles are expressions of conflicts, negative emotions centered on beliefs about God, or tension in relationship to God. Studies indicate that people who experience anger-related struggles with God assign negative intentions to God, are marked by an anxious or ambivalent attachment to God (Exline 2003), feel uncertain about whether God exists, and tend to nonbelief as a way to exit their relationship with God (Exline 2013). These respondents were identified by Exline and Martin (2005) as conflicted believers, an idea in line with Novotni and Petersen (2001) clinical description of emotional atheism. Thus, Kaplan and Schwartz (2008) provide examples in their description of the Biblical God, who is portrayed as a parental figure, involved and caring for his children. If a deity is believed as an authority, one who loves and cares for people, feeling negative emotions toward God or abandoned by God could be seen as an experience difficult to reframe cognitively (Exline et al. 2012). Thus, this perception might be associated with negative consequences (e.g., with lower well-being).

An ultimate meaning struggle involves doubting the importance, purpose, or meaning of one's life as a whole. The concept of ultimate meaning is rooted in the writings of Frankl (1962) and in the tradition of existential psychology. Ultimate meaning is concerned with the entire nature of existence, spirituality, identity, and the significance of suffering. Struggles of ultimate meaning do not involve tensions about matters of seemingly lesser significance, but center on strivings to understand whether life in general and one's own life in particular has a deeper, more profound meaning (Wilt et al. 2018). Researchers have shown that people reporting a crisis around meaning show lower levels of both satisfaction with life and positive mood, and higher levels of depression and anxiety (Schnell 2009). The sense of lack of religious support from God during the ultimate meaning struggle underscores the existential and spiritual character of this form of struggle (Wilt et al. 2018).

Some people feel that God supports them when they make an effort to live up to moral religious standards or when they believe that they are in temptation from evil. Religion is often viewed as a foundation of morality by both laypeople and those who study religion scientifically (Ward and King 2018). Thus, when people oppose evil forces or struggle to maintain the moral standards set by theological agents, they may have a sense of God's support. The image of a God who supports people when they are struggling to follow what they believe is consistent with the biblical image of a God who stands on the side of the faithful. Consequently, some people may develop a religiously oriented meaning-making process (Park 2013), which provides them with a sense of purpose and significance, and thus enhances well-being. This is in line with previous research, which has indicated positive relationships between religiousness, moral, and demonic struggle (Exline et al. 2014; Stauner et al. 2016; Zarzycka et al. 2018). We can conclude that these sorts of struggle may be common facets of religious life. Moreover, earlier research by Zarzycka and Zietek (2019) has confirmed that moral and demonic struggles may even foster well-being, because they can be a source of positive change and lead to spiritual growth.

The observation that moral struggle positively correlates with well-being, because moral struggle is accompanied by religious support, suggests that moral struggle is a different category to moral conflict, in part because moral struggle is correlated negatively with the measures of religiousness (Kroll et al. 2004). When in moral struggle, religious individuals seem to depend on the seriousness of their religious commitment and on the moral standard that is normative for their religious involvement (Ward and King 2018). In the effort made to live up to the moral standards of religion, some people may feel that God is on their side and is their ally, and feeling supported by God may be associated with improved well-being.

Demonization refers to interpreting someone or something as being controlled by destructive powers of a transcendental nature. More specifically, a demonic appraisal is the belief that the devil or demonic forces are directly or indirectly influencing someone or something. Cognitively reframing a negative event as the work of Satan allows a person to make sense of suffering while maintaining

beliefs in a benevolent God or a just world (Krumrei et al. 2011). Therefore, the ability to assign adverse events to evil forces may make it easier for some people to gain support from their faith, as it makes it possible to protect their image of God and relationship with God. This may also enhance a religiously oriented meaning-making process (Park 2013), which would provide a sense of purpose and significance, and is positively associated with well-being (Zarzycka and Zietek 2019).

Finally, our exploratory hypothesis that religious support and meaning making would also mediate the relationship between doubt struggles with well-being was not supported. Meaning making was the only significant mediator in this relationship. Interestingly, when religious doubts are the source of strain, some people attempt to understand and make meaning of their struggle rather than seek support from their religious involvement, and positive meaning making is correlated with improved well-being. This observation may suggest that doubt struggle is of a more cognitive nature.

4.3. Limitations

In regard to the shortcomings of the study, it should be emphasized that the cross-sectional design limits our ability to make a causal interpretation of the findings. Second, the study was based on individuals' self-reports, and thus, response bias could not be controlled. However, this possibility may be tempered somewhat by the fact that respondents completed the measures anonymously. Third, the sample consisted of adults from one country, dominated mostly by Polish Roman Catholics. Therefore, the results need replication in samples with inclusion of people of different faiths. Fourth, measuring religious support, we did not differentiate three types of support—God, clergy, and congregation support—which might show different patterns of associations with r/s struggle. This also refers to meaning making, which can include more emotional or cognitive processes. In futures studies, after increasing the sample size, we would recommend testing more complex models. Therefore, the results need to be replicated with samples where the current shortcomings are minimized.

The findings are noteworthy in several aspects. First, they suggest that the way r/s struggles affect well-being should be assessed in the context of general religious life, and especially support derived from religion. Second, they show effects of r/s struggles on well-being. Third, they also present some mechanisms explaining the r/s struggle–well-being link.

5. Conclusions

Taken together, this study aimed to investigate the mechanisms of the influence of r/s struggles on well-being. In light of our findings, we can conclude that religious support and meaning making serve as mediators of the relationships between r/s struggles and psychological well-being. Depending on the types of r/s struggle, people may feel that God is their ally and supports them in their struggle or, by contrast, they may feel deprived of God's support, which can result in an increase or decrease of well-being. During divine, ultimate meaning, and interpersonal struggles people reportedly feel that they are deprived of religious support, which makes it more difficult for them to give meaning to their struggles, and may adversely influence well-being. That is, even though religious support may facilitate meaning, and that in turn supports well-being, experiencing these types of r/s struggles turns down the intensity of this pathway, decreasing its overall impact. Conversely, during moral and demonic struggles, people reportedly feel supported by their religion, which may facilitate assigning meaning to struggles and positively influence well-being. Thus, the findings from this study suggest that struggles may have either a destructive, well-being-reducing potential or may help people improve their psychological well-being (Zarzycka 2017).

References

Abraham, Kristen M., and Catherine H. Stein. 2015. Stress-Related Personal Growth among Emerging Adults Whose Mothers Have Been Diagnosed with Mental Illness. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* 38: 227–33. [CrossRef]

Abu-Raiya, Hisham, and Kenneth I. Pargament. 2015. Religious Coping among Diverse Religions: Commonalities and Divergences. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 7: 24–33. [CrossRef]

Abu-Raiya, Hisham, Julie J. Exline, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Qutaiba Agbaria. 2015. Prevalence, Predictors, and Implications of Religious/Spiritual Struggles among Muslims: Muslim Religious/Spiritual Struggles. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54: 631–48. [CrossRef]

Abu-Raiya, Hisham, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Neal Krause. 2016. Religion as Problem, Religion as Solution: Religious Buffers of the Links between Religious/Spiritual Struggles and Well-Being/Mental Health. *Quality of Life Research: An International Journal of Quality Of Life Aspects of Treatment, Care and Rehabilitation* 25: 1265–74. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Ano, Gene G., and Kenneth I. Pargament. 2013. Predictors of Spiritual Struggles: An Exploratory Study. *Mental Health, Religion Culture* 16: 419–34. [CrossRef]

Ano, Gene G., and Erin B. Vasconcelles. 2005. Religious Coping and Psychological Adjustment to Stress: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61: 461–80. [CrossRef]

Beck, Richard, and Sara Taylor. 2008. The Emotional Burden of Monotheism: Satan, Theodicy, and Relationship with God. *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 36: 151–60. [CrossRef]

Bradshaw, Matt, and Blake Victor Kent. 2018. Prayer, Attachment to God, and Changes in Psychological Well-Being in Later Life. *Journal of Aging and Health* 30: 667–91. [CrossRef]

Bryant, Alyssa N., and Helen S. Astin. 2008. The Correlates of Spiritual Struggle during the College Years. *The Journal of Higher Education* 79: 1–27. [CrossRef]

Carver, Charles S. 1997. You Want to Measure Coping but Your Protocol' Too Long: Consider the Brief Cope. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 4: 92. [CrossRef]

Edmondson, Donald, Crystal L. Park, Stephenie R. Chaudoir, and Jennifer H. Wortmann. 2008. Death without God. Religious Struggle, Death Concerns, and Depression in the Terminally III. *Psychological Science* 19: 754–58. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Ellison, Christopher G., Qijuan Fang, Kevin J. Flannelly, and Rebecca A. Steckler. 2013. Spiritual Struggles and Mental Health: Exploring the Moderating Effects of Religious Identity. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 23: 214–29. [CrossRef]

Exline, Julie J. 2003. Anger toward God: A Brief Overview of Existing Research. *Psychology of Religion Newsletter* 29: 1–8.

Exline, Julie J. 2013. Religious and Spiritual Struggles. In *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Vol 1): Context, Theory, and Research*. Edited by Kenneth I. Pargament, Julie J. Exline and J. W. Jones. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 459–75.

Exline, Julie J., and Alyce Martin. 2005. Anger toward God: A New Frontier in Forgiveness Research. In *Handbook of Forgiveness*. Edited by Everett L. Worthington. New York: Routledge, pp. 73–88.

Exline, Julie J., Crystal L. Park, Joshua M. Smyth, and Michael P. Carey. 2011. Anger toward God: Social-Cognitive Predictors, Prevalence, and Links with Adjustment to Bereavement and Cancer. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100: 129–48. [CrossRef]

Exline, Julie J., Kalman J. Kaplan, and Joshua B. Grubbs. 2012. Anger, Exit, and Assertion: Do People See Protest toward God as Morally Acceptable? *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4: 264–77. [CrossRef]

Exline, Julie J., Kenneth I. Pargament, Joshua B. Grubbs, and Ann Marie Yali. 2014. The Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale: Development and Initial Validation. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 6: 208–22. [CrossRef]

Exline, Julie J., Joshua B. Grubbs, and Steffany J. Homolka. 2015. Seeing God as Cruel or Distant: Links with Divine Struggles Involving Anger, Doubt, and Fear of God's Disapproval. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 25: 29–41. [CrossRef]

Fatima, Shameem, Suera Sharif, and Iffat Khalid. 2018. How Does Religiosity Enhance Psychological Well-Being? Roles of Self-Efficacy and Perceived Social Support. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 10: 119–27. [CrossRef]

Fiala, William E., Jeffrey P. Bjorck, and Richard Gorsuch. 2002. The Religious Support Scale: Construction, Validation, and Cross-Validation. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 30: 761–86. [CrossRef]

Frankl, Viktor. 1962. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hayes, Andrew F. 2018. *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A Regression-Based Approach*, 2nd ed. New York: The Guilford Press.

Kaplan, Kalman J., and Matthew B. Schwartz. 2008. *A Psychology of Hope: A Biblical Response to Tragedy and Suicide*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Karaś, Dominika, Maria Kłym, and Jan Cieciuch. 2013. Eudajmonistyczny dobrostan psychiczny a kształtowanie poczucia tożsamości w sferze edukacyjnej i zawodowej [Eudaimonic psychological well-being and identity formation in educational and occupational domains]. *Psychologia Rozwojowa [Developmental Psychology]* 18: 87–101. [CrossRef]

Koenig, Harold G., Dana King, and Verna B. Carson. 2012. *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 2nd ed. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Krause, Neal, Christopher G. Ellison, and Keith M. Wulff. 1998. Church-Based Emotional Support, Negative Interaction, and Psychological Well-Being: Findings from a National Sample of Presbyterians. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37: 725–41. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Linda M. Chatters, Tina Meltzer, and David L. Morgan. 2000. Negative Interaction in the Church: Insights from Focus Groups with Older Adults. *Review of Religious Research* 41: 510–33. [CrossRef]

Kroll, Jerome, Elizabeth Egan, Paul Erickson, Kathleen Carey, and Myles Johnson. 2004. Moral Conflict, Religiosity, and Neuroticism in an Outpatient Sample. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 192: 682–88. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Krumrei, Elizabeth J., Annette Mahoney, and Kenneth I. Pargament. 2011. Demonization of Divorce: Prevalence Rates and Links to Postdivorce Adjustment. *Family Relations* 60: 90–103. [CrossRef]

Ladd, Kevin L., and Daniel N. McIntosh. 2008. Meaning, God, and Prayer: Physical and Metaphysical Aspects of Social Support. *Mental Health, Religion Culture* 11: 23–38. [CrossRef]

Lazar, Aryeh, and Jeffrey P. Bjorck. 2016. Religious support and psychological well-being: Gender differences among religious Jewish Israelis. *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 19: 393–407. [CrossRef]

Moreira-Almeida, Alexander, Francisco Lotufo Neto, and Harold G. Koenig. 2006. Religiousness and Mental Health: A Review. *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry* 28: 242–50. [CrossRef]

Nielsen, Michael E. 1998. An Assessment of Religious Conflicts and Their Resolutions. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37: 181–90. [CrossRef]

Novotni, Michele, and Randy Petersen. 2001. *Angry with God*. Colorado Springs: NavPress.

Pargament, Kenneth I., Nalini Tarakeshwar, Christopher G. Ellison, and Keith M. Wulff. 2001. Religious Coping among the Religious: The Relationships between Religious Coping and Well-Being in a National Sample of Presbyterian Clergy, Elders, and Members. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40: 497–513. [CrossRef]

Park, Crystal L. 2013. Religion and Meaning. In *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2nd ed. Edited by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park. New York: The Guilford Press, pp. 295–314.

Park, Crystal L., and J. M. Slattery. 2013. Religion, Spirituality and Mental Health. In *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2nd ed. Edited by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park. New York and London: The Guilford Press, pp. 540–59.

Rosmarin, David H., Kenneth I. Pargament, and Kevin J. Flannelly. 2009. Do Spiritual Struggles Predict Poorer Physical/Mental Health among Jews? *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 19: 244–58. [CrossRef]

Ryff, Carol D. 1989. Happiness Is Everything, or Is It? Explorations on the Meaning of Psychological Well-Being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57: 1069–81. [CrossRef]

Schnell, Tatjana. 2009. The Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (SoMe): Relations to Demographics and Well-Being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4: 483–99. [CrossRef]

Smith, Christian. 2003. Theorizing Religious Effects among American Adolescents. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42: 17–30. [CrossRef]

Smith, Timothy B., Michael E. McCullough, and Justin Poll. 2003. Religiousness and Depression: Evidence for a Main Effect and the Moderating Influence of Stressful Life Events. *Psychological Bulletin* 129: 614–36. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Stauner, Nick, Julie J. Exline, Joshua B. Grubbs, Kenneth I. Pargament, David F. Bradley, and Alex Uzdavines. 2016. Bifactor Models of Religious and Spiritual Struggles: Distinct from Religiousness and Distress. *Religions* 7: 68. [CrossRef]

Ward, Sarah J., and Laura A. King. 2018. Moral Self-Regulation, Moral Identity, and Religiosity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 115: 495–525. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Wilt, Joshua A., Nick Stauner, Matthew J. Lindberg, Joshua B. Grubbs, Julie J. Exline, and Kenneth I. Pargament. 2018. Struggle with Ultimate Meaning: Nuanced Associations with Search for Meaning, Presence of Meaning, and Mental Health. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 13: 240–51. [CrossRef]

Yi, Gu Hwa, and Jeffrey P. Bjorck. 2014. Religious support and psychological functioning in Korean American Protestant Christians. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 6: 44–52. [CrossRef]

Zarzycka, Beata. 2017. *Zmagania Religijne. Uwarunkowania i Funkcje [Religious Struggle: Predictors and Functions].* Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL.

Zarzycka, Beata, and Małgorzata M. Puchalska-Wasyl. 2019. Can Religious and Spiritual Struggle Enhance Well-Being? Exploring the Mediating Effects of Internal Dialogues. *Journal of Religion and Health*. [CrossRef]

Zarzycka, Beata, and Pawel Zietek. 2019. Spiritual Growth or Decline and Meaning-Making as Mediators of Anxiety and Satisfaction with Life during Religious Struggle. *Journal of Religion and Health* 58: 1072–86. [CrossRef]

Zarzycka, Beata, Paweł Ciszek, and Karolina Rykowska. 2018. The Polish Adaptation of the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale: Factorial Structure and Psychometric Properties. *Roczniki Psychologiczne/Annals of Psychology* 21: 255–78. [CrossRef]

Zarzycka, Beata, Anna Tychmanowicz, Tomasz Korulczyk, and Jeffrey P. Bjorck. forthcoming. *Religious Support and Psychological Functioning in a Polish Sample.* manuscript in preparation.