IGNATIUS, GRATITUDE AND POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Does Ignatian Gratitude Develop Subjective Well-Being?

Tom Carson

THE QUEST FOR HAPPINESS is very much on the agenda in secular thought: self-help texts on happiness line the shelves of bookshops, newspaper headlines declare that scientists can reveal what makes us happier, and now politicians are taking happiness seriously as an issue of policy. In Britain the Office for National Statistics is launching a 'wellbeing index'. Moreover, many people with a secular worldview are seeking happiness through spirituality. In his investigation of whether mind can control mood, the economist Richard Layard explores the possibilities of Buddhism, cognitive therapy and positive psychology for improving well-being; and among these perhaps unlikely bedfellows, he also mentions the Christian mystical tradition, with particular reference to Ignatian spirituality. Layard notes that Ignatius' understanding of 'praise' means being grateful, 'an essential condition for happiness and easier if you have some idea of who or what you are grateful to'.¹

The problem with this quest for Christians is that 'happiness' is often understood in a way that lacks depth in secular culture. But while it is certainly true that some popular notions of happiness are trivial, many of those found within secular positive psychology are much more sophisticated and may map on to Christian notions of *shalom*.² At a time when so

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¹ Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (London: Penguin, 2011), 194.

² William Klassen notes that the Hebrew concept of *shalom* underpins the Christian view of peace and has the broad meaning of 'the state of being well' (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman [New York: Doubleday, 1992], s.v. 'Peace'). Its richness is conveyed in its many uses throughout the Bible which involve physical and mental well-being: it is used to refer to 'health or restoration to health, to general well-being such as sound sleep, length of life, a tranquil death, and even to the physical safety of an individual'. Further, it is used 'to describe quiet tranquillity and contentment'

many are open to spirituality as a source of a happier life, Christians might do well to delve into their own tradition to rediscover the riches available there that promote well-being.

Positive Psychology and Ignatian Spirituality

The idea, mentioned by Richard Layard, that gratitude lies at the heart of Ignatian spirituality is well established.³ Wilkie Au suggests that 'Ignatian spirituality understands gratitude as more than a transient feeling; it is an abiding vision that recognises the gift-nature of everything'.⁴ Building upon the connections made by Phyllis Zagano and C. Kevin Gillespie between Ignatian spirituality and positive psychology, I shall be using the importance of gratitude in the writings of Ignatius to discover whether Ignatian spiritual practices do indeed increase subjective well-being.

Positive psychology aims to study 'the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions'.⁵ With its focus on human flourishing, it is not difficult to see why those who have an interest in spirituality would pay attention to its insights. A science which investigates areas such as gratitude, forgiveness, hope and humility has obvious relevance for those with spiritual interests.

Parallels between Ignatian spirituality and positive psychology have been most fully explored by Zagano and Gillespie.⁶ They suggest that Ignatian spirituality is 'in many ways positive in its approach to the world and the self' and that both disciplines 'have as a particular focus the freeing of the individual to engage the world in social commitment'.⁷ While noting divergences in grounding and practice, they suggest that 'each can be seen as informing and assisting the other' and that perhaps positive psychology 'can offer the Ignatian movement some useful techniques and resources'.⁸

and the root ideas of the Hebrew word are 'well-being, wholeness, soundness, completeness' (*The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993], s.v. 'Peace').

³ For a detailed survey of gratitude in the writings of Ignatius, see Gerald M. Fagin, 'Stirred to Profound Gratitude', *Review for Religious*, 54 (1995), 237–252.

⁴ Wilkie Au, 'An Ignatian Path to Gratitude', *The Way*, 49/3 (July 2010), 65.

⁵ Shelly L. Gable and Jonathan Haidt, 'What (and Why) Is Positive Psychology?', Review of General Psychology, 9/2 (2005), 104.

⁶ Phyllis Zagano and C. Kevin Gillespie, 'Ignatian Spirituality and Positive Psychology', *The Way*, 45/4 (October 2006), 41–58.

⁷ Zagano and Gillespie, 'Ignatian Spirituality and Positive Psychology', 42.

⁸ Zagano and Gillespie, 'Ignatian Spirituality and Positive Psychology', 42.

Although there may seem to be little overlap between subjective well-being and the goal of Ignatius' first principle—the salvation of the soul (Exx 23)—it does little justice to the Ignatian spiritual tradition to focus entirely on salvation in the hereafter. Zagano and Gillespie suggest a meaningful comparison between Martin Seligman's distinction between momentary and enduring happiness, and the way in which believers 'distinguish transitory pleasures from the causes of genuine happiness, and ... recognise the negative affections arising from specific unfreedoms'.⁹

Zagano's and Gillespie's work begins to compare the practices of the two disciplines. In particular, they focus on Ignatian gratitude practices in relation to the 'Three Blessings' exercise and the 'Gratitude Visit'.¹⁰ I hope to build upon their work by using positive psychology to provide empirical evidence as to how Ignatian gratitude practices develop subjective well-being. In what follows, I examine interventions (studies in which participants are asked to engage in specific forms of behaviour over a set period of time) that endeavour to improve subjective well-being through cultivating gratitude.

Gratitude in Positive Psychology

Counting Blessings

In research from 2003, Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough sought to find out whether systematically counting blessings has an impact on subjective well-being.¹¹ Their work was designed to manipulate gratitude, addressing whether expressing gratitude, rather than focusing on complaints or neutral life events, enhanced well-being. In their first ten-week study they assigned participants, each of whom wrote a journal every week, to one of three groups: in the *gratitude* group they wrote about up to five things for which they were grateful over the last week; in the *hassles* group they wrote about five irritations from the last week; in the *events* group (the neutral one) they wrote about any events which had affected them over the last week. In addition, participants listed their moods, physical health and overall judgments about their lives. The results of this first study were that, relative to the *hassles* and *events*

⁹ Zagano and Gillespie, 'Ignatian Spirituality and Positive Psychology', 43.

¹⁰ Zagano and Gillespie, 'Ignatian Spirituality and Positive Psychology', 47–49.

¹¹ Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, 'Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84/2 (2003), 377–389.

groups, 'participants in the gratitude condition felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic regarding their expectations for the upcoming week'.¹²

In a second study, Emmons and McCullough increased the frequency of journal entries to daily over a period of two weeks. The results for those in the *gratitude* group were impressive: 'participants felt more joyful, enthusiastic, interested, attentive, energetic, excited, determined, and strong than those in the hassles condition'.¹³

In their third study, they used a sample of adults with neuromuscular diseases, randomly assigning participants to a gratitude or a control group—in the latter they only completed experience appraisals each day. As in the previous studies, those in the gratitude condition showed a far higher degree of positive affect and satisfaction with life. Further, their spouses or partners,

... reported that the participants appeared to have higher subjective well-being than did the spouses of participants in the control condition, indicating that the positive emotional changes that occur after practicing gratitude are not apparent to the participants alone.¹⁴

Emmons and McCullough believe that they have established 'a rather easily implemented strategy for improving one's level of well-being'.¹⁵ Interestingly, this is minimal and only requires participants to reflect upon blessings either once a week for ten weeks or every day for two weeks. These noteworthy results have been replicated by a second set of researchers in a six-week intervention, during which they asked participants to write down three things for which they were grateful either once a week or three times a week, while control participants completed only happiness assessments.¹⁶ They found that well-being increased for those who performed the activity only once a week, suggesting that perhaps 'counting blessings several times a week led people to become bored with the practice, finding it less fresh and meaningful over time'.¹⁷

¹² Emmons and McCullough, 'Counting Blessings Versus Burdens', 381.

¹³ Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 31.

¹⁴ Emmons, Thanks!, 34.

¹⁵ Emmons and McCullough, 'Counting Blessings Versus Burdens', 386.

¹⁶ Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon M. Sheldon and David Schkade, 'Pursuing Happiness: The Architecture of Sustainable Change', *Review of General Psychology*, 9/2 (2005), 111–131.

¹⁷ Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade, 'Pursuing Happiness', 126.



The Gratitude Visit

In a different intervention designed to increase subjective well-being through gratitude, Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihalv Csikszentmihalvi developed the idea of the gratitude visit. Using the internet to recruit participants, they designed five happiness exercises and a placebo control exercise.¹⁸ Two of these interventions focused on increasing awareness of what is positive about oneself, two focused on identifying strengths of character, while the gratitude visit itself endeavoured to build gratitude. In this exercise participants were given 'one week to write and then deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them but had never been properly thanked'.¹⁹ The researchers found that this resulted in large positive well-being results immediately after the test-more so than the other interventions-and continued to result in positive changes for the next month. After six months, well-being levels had returned to the same as pre-test levels. While such an intervention is less practical in everyday life than counting one's blessings, Emmons notes that the benefits of a gratitude visit 'extend beyond what we have observed for the gratitude journaling practice'.²⁰

¹⁸ Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 'Positive Psychology: An Introduction', *American Psychologist*, 55/1 (January 2000), 5–14.

¹⁹ Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 'Positive Psychology', 416.

²⁰ Emmons, Thanks!, 50.

Does God Make a Difference?

What difference does the object of our gratitude make? Recent work by another group of researchers has addressed this question by comparing religious gratitude with general gratitude.²¹ Using an online survey of 405 adults with different religious beliefs and varying commitments to them, they tried to find out what the mediating mechanisms are by which

The object of one's gratitude does matter

religion relates to increased gratitude and whether religious gratitude produces greater psychological benefits than general gratitude. They found that religion promotes gratitude by 'providing unique opportunities to experience this trait'.²² Whereas gratitude to God 'can occur with the simple recognition

of blessings in one's life', non-religious gratitude 'is constricted by the perception of physical agents, and thus can only occur in interpersonal contexts'.²³ Further they found that, while gratitude is tied to well-being irrespective of religious themes, 'it appears that religious gratitude has an additional positive effect on well-being for individuals who are religiously committed'.²⁴ It seems that the object of one's gratitude *does* matter, and that being grateful to God promotes greater subjective well-being than gratitude in general for those with a strong religious commitment.

Ignatian 'Gratitude Interventions'

I shall now examine three Ignatian exercises, each designed to increase religious commitment, which promote gratitude to God. My purpose is to ascertain whether they bear enough resemblance to the gratitude interventions we have explored to suggest that they too promote subjective well-being.

The Examen

The examen of consciousness (Exx 43) is a prayer consisting of five points, which Ignatius believed was the most important exercise for a person to conduct daily. George Aschenbrenner notes that the 'mature Ignatius near the end of his life was always examining every movement and inclination of his heart', and sees this practice as 'the overflow of

²¹ David H. Rosmarin, Steven Pirutinsky, Adam B. Cohen, Yardana Galler and Elizabeth Krumrei, 'Grateful to God or Just Plain Grateful? A Comparison of Religious and General Gratitude', in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6/5 (September 2011), 389–396.

²² Rosmarin and others, 'Grateful to God', 393.

²³ Rosmarin and others, 'Grateful to God', 393.

²⁴ Rosmarin and others, 'Grateful to God', 394.

those regular intensive prayer-exercises of examen every day'.²⁵ He argues that the purpose of the examen is 'developing a heart with a discerning vision to be active not only for one or two quarter-hour periods in a day but continually'.²⁶ The five steps, then, are to be seen 'as dimensions of the Christian consciousness, formed by God's work in the heart as it confronts and grows within this world and all of reality'.²⁷ In other words, the experience of the examen should become a habit in one's consciousness.

Gratitude lies at the very heart of the examen prayer: 'The first point is to give thanks to God our Lord for the benefits I have received from him' (Exx 43). Donald St Louis suggests that what is important is not an exhaustive list of benefits, 'but rather a deepening sense of one's life as richly blessed by God, as suffused with the gracious presence and action of God'.²⁸ He believes that the examen should be set in the context of the Principle and Foundation, which reminds individuals of their giftedness by God:

In this sense, the first point of the Examen may be seen as a summary of the Principle and Foundation, a reminder of who one is before the living God in all the graced concreteness and uniqueness of one's personal history, and with such an awareness leading to a deepening gratitude and desire to respond in ways that are increasingly 'more conducive to the end for which we are created' (Exx 23).²⁹

There are obvious similarities between the examen and gratitude interventions that focus on counting blessings. In particular, Emmons's and McCullough's second study encouraged participants to count blessings each day. The empirical evidence suggests that regularly giving thanks for the benefits we have received enhances well-being. The most obvious mechanism by which this might take place would seem to be the enhancement of positive affect by increasing one's enjoyment of these benefits. One important lesson from the replication of Emmons's and McCullough's study by Lyubomirsky and others is that people may become bored with a practice done every day, 'finding it less fresh and meaningful over time'.³⁰ This is a useful insight for the Ignatian spiritual

²⁵ George A. Aschenbrenner, 'Consciousness Examen', Review for Religious, 31 (1972), 16.

²⁶ Aschenbrenner, 'Consciousness Examen', 16.

²⁷ Aschenbrenner, 'Consciousness Examen', 16.

²⁸ Donald St Louis, 'The Ignatian Examen', in *The Way of Ignatius Loyola: Contemporary Approaches to the Spiritual Exercises*, edited by Philip Sheldrake (London: SPCK, 1991), 156.

²⁹ St Louis, 'The Ignatian Examen', 157.

³⁰ Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade, 'Pursuing Happiness', 126.

tradition and reminds us that the blessings recalled should be varied in order to counteract adaptation.

It is clear, of course, that there is not complete correspondence between experimental studies of gratitude and Ignatian practice. Zagano and Gillespie highlight the fact that 'a term like "gratitude" has richer, more specific nuances in Christian spirituality, arising from a sense that all things depend for their very existence on a creator God'.³¹ Ultimately, the purpose of expressing gratitude within the Ignatian spiritual tradition is part of the process of 'finding God in all things'. Aschenbrenner articulates just how powerful this approach to gratitude is:

Only the truly poor person can appreciate the slightest gift and feel genuine gratitude. The more deeply we live in faith the more we become aware of how poor we are and how gifted; life itself becomes humble, joyful thanksgiving. This should gradually become an element of our abiding consciousness.³²

According to Aschenbrenner, God will eventually show us that 'all is gift'.³³

Meditation on My Own Sins

In the First Week, gratitude arises out of a consideration of our sins. In the second exercise (Exx 55–61), Ignatius proposes a prayer of five points. We first imagine a court record of our sins in which we 'call to memory all of the sins of my life, looking at them year by year' (Exx 56). We then consider just how evil each of these sins is (Exx 57). The third point asks us to humble ourselves by comparing ourselves with others, the angels and saints, and 'all of creation compared with God' (Exx 58). In the fourth, the individual is to 'consider who God is against whom I have sinned, by going through his attributes and comparing them with their opposites in myself' (Exx 59). In the final point we are led to profound gratitude to God who continues to love and bless us, even though we sin.

This is an exclamation of wonder and surging emotion, uttered as I reflect on all creatures and wonder how they have allowed me to live and have preserved me in life. The angels: How is it that, although they are the swords of God's justice, they have borne with me, protected

³¹ Zagano and Gillespie, 'Ignatian Spirituality and Positive Psychology', 46.

³² Aschenbrenner, 'Consciousness Éxamen', 17.

³³ Aschenbrenner, 'Consciousness Examen', 17.

me, and prayed for me? The saints: How is it that they have interceded and prayed for me? Likewise, the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the elements; the fruits, birds, fishes, and animals. And the earth: How is it that it has not opened up and swallowed me, creating new hells for me to suffer in forever? (Exx 60)

Ignatius concludes by suggesting a 'colloquy of mercy—speaking and giving thanks to God our Lord for giving me life until now' (Exx 61).

According to David Fleming, gratitude arises here from the fact that 'Ignatius invites us to look at our own history of sin and evil in the light of the goodness of God'.

Even though we reject God, he still blesses us Sin is not the breaking of a law or commandment as much as a lack of gratitude We stand in awe before the majesty of God, the One who is the Giver of the whole of our life. How can we offend the God of our life? If our heart could truly grasp what God is doing for us, how could we sin? We would be too grateful to sin.³⁴

While I can find no psychological study that explicitly connects gratitude to sin, it may be fruitful to compare this Ignatian meditation with an intervention which investigates the impact of gratitude on bringing closure to unpleasant emotional memories.³⁵ As anyone who has called to mind their own sins will testify, this experience brings such memories to the surface in abundance. One mechanism through which gratitude may enhance subjective well-being is *adaptive coping*, in which individuals make sense of stressful or difficult life experiences by reframing memories through gratitude.

In a study participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups after recalling and reporting on an unpleasant memory. They wrote for twenty minutes in three sessions: the first (control) group about topics unrelated to the memory, the second simply about the memory itself, and the third about consequences of the memory for which they were now able to feel grateful. The researchers found that those who were in the gratitude condition showed more closure and less emotional impact from the memory than did participants in the other groups. They note

³⁴ David Fleming, What is Ignatian Spirituality? (Chicago: Loyola, 2008), 27–28.

³⁵ Philip C. Watkins, Lilia Cruz, Heather Holben and Russell L. Kolts, 'Taking Care of Business? Grateful Processing of Unpleasant Memories', *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3/2 (April 2008), 87–99.

that one way of viewing this reappraisal is that it 'encouraged individuals to turn ... bad events into redemptive events'.³⁶

Similarly, Ignatius uses gratitude as an expression of praise for God's redemption. The nature of 'redemption', however, in Ignatius' case is clearly more theologically loaded: individuals recognise themselves as loved and forgiven by God through their acknowledgement of their sins, through their spiritual poverty. As Wilkie Au writes:

In the First Week ... we seek a felt knowledge of both our own sinfulness and of God's merciful love that keeps us in an accepting embrace—no matter how we have faltered and sinned The grace of the First Week has taken firm root when we can acknowledge our failings with unshakeable confidence in the constancy of God. Deep within, we know that we are loved sinners.³⁷

The Contemplation to Attain Love

The Contemplation to Attain Love (Exx 230–237) marks the final meditation of the Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius suggests that the exercitant 'ask for interior knowledge of all the great good I have received, in order that, stirred to profound gratitude, I may become able to love and serve his Divine Majesty in all things' (Exx 233). First we are to call to mind the gifts we have received in 'creation, redemption, and other gifts particular to myself' (Exx 234). We then consider how God *dwells* in all things, including ourselves (Exx 235). Third, how God *labours* for us in all things, 'working in the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle ... giving them their existence' (Exx 236). Finally, 'we consider how all good things and gifts descend from above' (Exx 237). This contemplation is designed to cultivate an attitude of gratitude so that we might serve and love God in everything. Michael Buckley finds in it a 'developmental purpose':

It immediately aims at an elevation of consciousness, a growth in awareness, that kind of total human perception and experience which Ignatius called 'interior knowledge' which caught up understanding, sensibility and feeling.³⁸

It is clear how empirical evidence might support the possibility of this contemplation developing subjective well-being. Here is a practice

³⁶ Watkins and others, 'Taking Care of Business?' 96.

³⁷ Wilkie Au, 'Ignatian Service: Gratitude and Love in Action', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 40/2 (Summer 2008), 72.

³⁸ Michael Buckley, 'The Contemplation to Attain Love', *The Way Supplement*, 24 (Spring 1975), 95.

which enables individuals not simply to count their blessings on a regular basis, but to begin to see all life as blessing. In this sense it goes far beyond any intervention encouraging participants to list, for example, three good things in their lives.

Perhaps it would be better to understand the contemplation as a profound *gratitude visit* to God, in which individuals take the time consciously to contemplate all of the ways in which they have received and receive blessings from God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, and then actively to express their thanks. Buckley argues that the exercise gives the exercitant interior knowledge of 'the goodness with which God has surrounded him' and highlights how this might be perceived in an interpersonal way.

The initial purpose is essentially an assimilation of the good within life, but the good as interpersonal—as from God and for me. It is to experience the good as gift. It is to perceive human history and physical nature, to perceive it as good, to perceive that it is of God It is ... to experience overwhelmingly that he has been ... loved by God in all things.³⁹

It would hardly be surprising if genuine gratitude cultivated through the Contemplation to Attain Love also led to the 'boost in happiness and



³⁹ Buckley, 'Contemplation to Attain Love', 95.

decrease in depressive symptoms' found in individuals who completed a gratitude visit.40

Once again, however, the divergence between Christian spirituality and positive psychology must be noted. As we have seen, Christian understandings of gratitude involve the dimension of spiritual poverty. This especially true in the fourth point of the final contemplation in which 'all good things and gifts descend from above' (Exx 236). William A. Barry comments:

> If we could only experience all blessings and gifts as descending to us from above, then we would be able to live in spiritual poverty. We would be 'indifferent to', 'at balance towards', all created gifts and blessings because we would have intimate knowledge that these are only pale, even though wonderful, reflections of the deepest desire of our hearts, God, 'from whom all blessings flow'.⁴¹

Further, gratitude in Ignatian spirituality is a gateway to recognising God's presence in all things. As Margaret Hebblethwaite notes, this 'does not mean only finding God in beautiful things'.⁴² She suggests that 'in the bad and ugly experiences too we can find a way to God'.⁴³ In contrast to the prevailing thought in positive psychology, which encourages gratitude in response to things that are perceived as good, Ignatian spirituality shows us how to seek God through gratitude in all circumstances of life.

Development and Dialogue

These three exercises, each intended to cultivate 'profound gratitude', clearly bear enough resemblance to certain gratitude interventions to suggest that they too may help to develop subjective well-being. They each encourage individuals to 'count their blessings' and express gratitude for all things. We have also seen some research which suggests that belief in God is in itself a mediating mechanism for greater gratitude, and that religious gratitude has an additional positive effect on well-being for individuals who are religiously committed. As the Spiritual Exercises are designed to cultivate greater religious commitment, in part through

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⁴⁰ Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 'Positive Psychology', 417–418.

⁴¹ William A. Barry, Finding God in All Things: A Companion to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1991), 139. ⁴² Margaret Hebblethwaite, Finding God in All Things: Praying with St Ignatius (London: Fount, 1987),

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⁴³ Hebblethwaite, Finding God in All Things, 232.

the experience of gratitude, it would seem highly likely that Ignatian spiritual practices develop subjective well-being.

Christian spirituality has much to gain from a dialogue with positive psychology. Psychology helps to explain what is taking place as the Christian engages in ancient spiritual practices and offers a partial explanation of what God has built into creation. Many in the secular world are open to the exploration of spirituality as a way of achieving a happier life, and positive psychology offers Christians greater confidence that our spiritual traditions promote well-being.

Dialogue, of course, works two ways, and there are various things that positive psychology might learn from Christian spirituality. Watts, Dutton and Gulliford note that 'psychological practice has developed new and potentially more effective ways of helping people to enact spiritual practices in secular contexts' which may lead some 'to see positive psychology as supplanting and improving upon centuries of rather imprecise, ineffective religious concern with spiritual qualities'.⁴⁴ But they are nevertheless anxious 'not to discard the religious contribution, but to approach positive psychology within the broader framework that religious reflection and practice can offer'.⁴⁵ I suggest that they are right in this approach: as I have shown, the concept of gratitude is far richer in a theological context, and positive psychology may gain new insights by attending to Christian spirituality.

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⁴⁴ Fraser Watts, Kevin Dutton and Liz Gulliford, 'Human Spiritual Qualities: Integrating Psychology and Religion', *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 9/3 (June 2006), 277.

⁴⁵ Watts, Dutton and Gulliford, 'Human Spiritual Qualities', 278.