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## Quest for meaning is about the journey, not the destination

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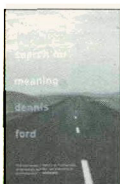
# Quest for meaning is about the journey, not the destination

Reviewed by TRACY TIEMEIER

Over the course of our lives, we inevitably ask the question "Why?" Whether we seek to understand the purpose of our sorrows and joys, or whether we wonder if we will have any lasting significance, we all desire to understand the meaning of life. In his book, Dennis Ford, author of *Sins of Omission: A Primer on Moral Indifference* (Fortress Press), provides a helpful introduction on classic and contemporary approaches to meaning for those interested in this enduring human quest.

Although Ford's focus is largely nonreligious, the Catholic in me cannot resist wondering where religious meaning fits into the search for life's purpose. Ford himself rejects "conven-

tional" Christian answers in his own search. But what about people like me who see themselves as rather conventional persons of faith? Do we not strive to find a greater significance in our lives? How do our quests fit into the search for meaning? As I see it, mature faith must become deeper than a simple acceptance of the answers we were given as children. When we were young, we accepted those easy answers. As we grew older, however, we began to question them. Perhaps we rejected the answers we were taught and sought new ones; or perhaps we reclaimed those answers with the deeper awareness that comes



**THE SEARCH FOR MEANING: A SHORT HISTORY**

By Dennis Ford  
Published by the University of California Press, \$16.95

through the examined life.

It may be true that the search for meaning is indeed a rejection of "conventional" answers, if it means that those answers cannot remain unquestioned. But while we must question our faith in order to make it more mature, we need not reject it.

For Ford, the idea of the sacred is important for a number of the perspectives he considers. However, more can be said. Religious meaning can contain quite contradictory answers and constantly frustrates our attempts to understand it.

After all, Christian teaching on Jesus Christ holds together in one

person, the human and the divine, the creator and the created, life and death. Christians in search of the meaning of their faith, then, are bound to find its significance to be just as complicated. In the end, finding meaning may not lead to a rejection of faith but it may ultimately require the embracing of a more complex and sometimes paradoxical one.

Ford's "short history" is really a presentation of eight out of many possible approaches to meaning: myth, philosophy, science, postmodernism, pragmatism, archetypal psychology, metaphysics and naturalism. These approaches differ over such issues as whether meaning is found in a transcendent reality beyond the natural world, or whether meaning is something confined to the material world and what we make of it. In his explanation, Ford focuses almost exclusively on Western perspectives on meaning. He oversimplifies cultures he considers "primitive" and religious traditions, such as Hinduism, that offer diverse responses to the question of life's meaning.

Of course, Ford cannot possibly address all approaches on the meaning of life in such a short amount of space (264 pages, including the appendix). His choice to restrict himself to a limited number of perspectives rather than to try to present a complete history of meaning makes the difficult issues he discusses more manageable for readers. It also provides a good starting point for those wishing to pursue further study. Even in narrowing his scope, Ford is to be commended for condensing an enormous amount of information and making it understandable to non-experts. I particularly appreciate how clearly he presents heavy-hitters like Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant and William James, to name but a few. In doing so, Ford offers a good opportunity to begin learning about these great thinkers of Western thought.

There is a multitude of ways to approach the question of the meaning of life. Each of us has our own story, our own journey. But one thing we all share — regardless of our religion, culture, or place in society — is that we are involved in that search for meaning. We all ask the question, "Why?" As any parent knows, a child's basic orientation to the world is through her insatiable, and sometimes maddening, desire to know: "Why? Why? Why?" As we develop, our questions latch onto different things, yet the basic desire to understand remains. To question is therefore fundamental to our human condition. And so, perhaps it is not finding the answer to the meaning of life that makes us human, but instead the very act of questioning itself. To be human is to ask, "Why?" and to discover our meaning is ultimately more about the journey than the destination.

[Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier is assistant professor of theological studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. She is also co-chair of the Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue.]

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