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# Sense-Making and Religious Paths: One and the Same?

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 Question 4

Sense-Making and Religious Paths: One and the Same?

***“Sense-making” is a recognized phenomenon in LIS: one that spawned a body of literature with distinct philosophical approaches and methodological strategies.***

***“Sense-making” in a broader sense could be defined as one of the goals of religious thought and practice. Discuss how the LIS literature in sense-making connects, or fails to connect, with sense-making in this broader sense.***

**INTRODUCTION**

Sense-making<sup>1</sup> was introduced by Brenda Dervin in 1972. It is a metatheory, methodology and method to discovering why people think the way they do and how they make sense of their lives. Of particular interest to myself and my examiners is the comparison of Sense-making to sense making in general as a goal of religious thought and practice.

Sense-making is not merely the goal of religious thought and practice (speaking to it as some sort of end, as a particular religious sense-made, and in a singular sense as one Sense-making event), but can also describe the constant and active enactment of sense being made in a religious manner. Sense-making better encapsulates an understanding of religious thought and practice when it is understood as life being lived through making sense. However, religious Sense-making is merely a unique type or variety of sense making that human agents may engage with to make sense of their world—to bridge existential or ultimate gaps in their lives. The goal of this paper is to

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<sup>1</sup> For clarity's sake, I'll be using the term “Sense-making” with a capital “S” to refer to the concept as promulgated by Dervin. If used in the inverse “make-sense,” I'll place a hyphen in-between the two words to indicate this special type of making sense to also refer to Dervin's Sense-making. Otherwise, with the term is referred to generically.

examine where Sense-making connects or fails to connect to the idea of sense-making as a goal of religious thought. A review of the literature reveals a much more twisted path to this understanding, however.

The paper will begin with a brief introduction to Dervin's Sense-making. It will then discuss what Dervin has called "human mandates". Her own theory describes the human mandate as "to move through time and space (Dervin, 1983, p. 7)... construct[ing] interpretive bridges over a gappy reality" (Dervin, 1999b, p. 730). To connect Sense-making with its definition of being a religious goal, I have drawn upon other human mandates from the allied fields of the psychology of religion, transpersonal psychology, sociology and information behaviour to highlight a profound similarity between the concepts and enactments of Sense-making, meaning-making, information-seeking, fixing the real, and coping with reality. After reviewing these mandates, I return to Dervin's Sense-making as a sort of master model for these human mandates to discuss what I have termed "the existential gap". After defining it, I suggest that what makes Sense-making (and its related mandates) similar to the pursuit of a religious goal is the bridging of this existential gap. At this point, I note critiques from Savolainen (1999) and Kari (2001) as to the weak-point in Dervin's metatheory of Sense-making, gap-bridging. In order to provide some insight into gap-bridging to bridge the gap mentioned by Kari and Savolainen and to provide more depth to Dervin's definition of information as "sense made," I put forward that what is happening during gap bridging is a hermeneutic endeavour and that to make sense is to engage hermeneutically with reality. Related theories of tacit knowledge, embodied familiarization and information use with their focus on this hermeneutic enterprise in-the-world, so to speak, refine this

this understanding and suggest that what people are looking for when they make-sense religiously is not information understood as information-as-knowledge, but rather information as an experience.

Then, I take the Buddhist path as a specific example of how religious thought and practice can be viewed as Sense-making, in particular the development of spiritual realizations in Buddhism. The Buddhist path allows for an easy explanation of how sense can be made in a religious manner as Buddhist practice is attuned to its own sense-making as it were through the application of Buddhist philosophy or doctrine. This application may be more difficult with another religious tradition. However, the Buddhist problem of 'ignorance' presents a difficulty to the ethos of Sense-making (the ethos being, as I have described it, "any sense makes sense as long as it makes-sense"). Largely, humans' sense-making goes unexamined, but in Buddhism, a human's habitual sense-making is challenged as it leads to suffering and misery. However, this challenge with the ethos of Sense-making can still be understood within the boundaries of Sense-making by understanding the influence of religious cognitive authorities and communities of practice upon an individual's Sense-making.

Finally, I will discuss briefly how religious information seeking behaviours challenges conceptions of every-day life information behaviours. Are they perhaps, as Clemens & Cushing (2010) have suggested, beyond every day life? Or rather does their simultaneous "situated and transsituated"-ness (Dervin, 1999b, p. 733) force scholars to consider them in the middle ground?

## **WHAT IS SENSE-MAKING?**

As mentioned in the introduction, Sense-making was introduced in 1972 by Dervin and her colleagues, but did not gain the name “Sense-making” until 1983 (Dervin, 1999b). The basic goal of Sense-making is to understand how individuals negotiate living in an unpredictable world. The primary metaphor of Sense-making is the Sense-making Triangle which outlines the three essential components of Sense-making: Situation-Gap-Use. An individual, enacting the human mandate to “to move through time and space” (Dervin, 1983, p. 7), and that can be situated within a unique context and time and place, encounters a gap and is forced to stop their movement forward as per the mandate. Examples of gaps include: a misunderstanding, a negative emotion or feeling or a lack of knowledge. It is anytime when the sense that that individual was operating in fails to provide a satisfactory accounting for new experiences and thus the “individual’s internal sense has ‘run out’” (Dervin & Nilan, 1986, p. 21). Thus, to satisfactorily create new sense, the gap must be bridged.

The bridging of the gap is where Dervin’s focus on “verbings” enters. The focus of the bridging of the gap is on the *hows* of people’s sense makings rather than the *whats* of people’s sense making. As such, scholars have listed a multiplicity of ways that human beings bridge the gaps. These verbings include for instance: got information, got help, got directions, went down a new path, decided to start over, or “observings, thinkings, idea creatings, comparings, contrastings, rejectings, talkings, sendings, agreeings, disagreeings” (Dervin, 1991, p. 64). Once the gap has been bridged, sense has been remade and the individual continues to move through time and space until sense is unmade again, using the sense that has been made. Although

sometimes, making-sense leads to further sense-making or perhaps even sense-unmaking.

Within LIS, Sense-making has been used extensively. Dervin reports in 1999 that over one hundred scholars are using Sense-making as a metatheory, methodology or method (Dervin, 2003/1999). Fifteen years later, the number of examples and applications is sure to have increased. At the intersection between information and religion, Sense-making has been used by Roland (2007; 2008) to study the Sense-making of a clergy member as he prepares and writes a sermon and as well by Coco (1999) who examined conflicts between Catholics' sense-making and the orthodox teachings of the Church. Some further studies by other others that employ Sense-making in a religious context are summarized briefly in Dervin et al. (2011).

## **HUMAN MANDATES**

Dervin fails to define what exactly she means by mandate, but from what I understand of her theory, I believe it is safe to imply that it refers to the 'essential activity of living human beings.' Curiously, Dervin's choice of the use of the word 'mandate' itself, rather than a less 'powerful' word, signals a subtle undertone in reference to a divine, spiritual, or otherworldly authority issuing the mandate. In her writings, Dervin describes three human mandates: (1) "to move through time-space" (Dervin, 1983, p. 7); (2) "to make sense without complete instruction in a reality, which is itself in flux and requires continued sense-making" (Dervin, 1999a, p. 332); and (3) "to reach out to the sense made by others, in order to understand what insights it may provide into our continuing human dilemma" (Dervin, 1999a, p. 332). Despite Dervin's lack of methodological clarity here, I believe that these three mandates can be condensed into

one that closely resembles the second mandate since the command to make sense involves movement through time and space, otherwise there would be no sense to make (things would be static) and attempting to discover the Sense-makings of others is really for the purpose of ameliorating an individual's own Sense-making.

In order to link Dervin's Sense-making with the pursuit of religious goals, I have borrowed from the psychology of religion, transpersonal psychology, sociology and information behaviour to highlight a profound similarity between the concepts of, and enactments of, Sense-making, meaning-making, information-seeking, fixing the real, and coping with reality in that they align with the intention in Dervin's human mandate. In other words, I treat these concepts synonymously.

I will briefly illustrate their close alignment with each other. Common to all of them is the fact that they are all understood (or can be understood) from a whole-life perspective. In regards to Sense-making, Weick's (2006) description of sense making as "order, interruption, recovery" (p. 1731) harkens to Dervin's Sense-making Triangle of situation, gap, and use. Descriptions of human mandates using Meaning-making closely approximates Sense-making's mandate. Oman (2013) writes "Scholars have offered evidence that religious beliefs, emotions, practices, and experiences may provide meaning and facilitate dealing with fundamental existential issues such as death, suffering, and injustice" (p. 36). Oman's statement captures the impermanence of life which is similar to Dervin's idea of flux. Park (2013) supplies: "People require a system of meaning to comprehend the world and to navigate and organize the infinite stimuli the encounter, from basic perceptions of their environment to broad existential questions" (p. 357) which captures Dervin's sense of a lack of complete instruction into

reality. Allport's (1950) statement, "To many men [sic], religion is primarily a search for complete knowledge, for unfissioned truth" (p. 18) also relates to a search for a set of complete instructions to reality, linking information-seeking to the rest as a human mandate. Case (2012) cites Donohew, Tipton & Haney (1978, p. 31) and presents a similar sentiment: "Information-seeking must be one of our most fundamental methods for coping with our environment" (p. 19).

The notion of "fixing reality" speaks to proverbially 'pinning it down in one place' so that it can be better understood, or in other words, so that sense can be made of it or meaning properly derived from it. In regards to fixing reality, Nelson (2000) writes: "I would assert that behind the activity of most of our lives there lies a profound spiritual impulse—a passion to know the ontological bottom line and align ourselves with it" (p. 79). Dervin (1999b) hints at another (unofficial) human mandate when she writes "Sense-Making assumes that the quest of human beings to fix the real faces a never-ending riddle" (p. 730) which echoes Nelson's statement. Finally, Sense-making, meaning-making, information-seeking and fixing reality can all be described as a way to cope with our reality which often pits us against the likes of the sufferings of birth, old age, death, parting from things we do not want to be parted from and not being parted from things that we do want to be parted from. The pioneering psychologist of religion, William James (1958/1902) thoughtfully supplies, "If we were to ask the question: 'What is human life's chief concern?' one of the answers we should receive would be: 'It is happiness.' How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is in fact for most men [sic] at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure" (p. 76), which speaks to our profound motive to avoid suffering and seek



happiness that is the essence of coping with reality. Finally, Baker (2004) offers some findings on a study of information needs at the end of life. She reports that information “help[s] them [the dying] cope with a phase of life that is fully of mystery and uncertainty” (p. 82) which speaks to the synonymy of information-seeking and coping with reality.

### **THE EXISTENTIAL GAP**

Now that it has been demonstrated that these different human mandates are roughly espousing the same concept, I return to Dervin’s Sense-making as a sort of master model that stands in for the aggregate of these human mandates as Dervin’s model is the most theoretically developed and extensive of these models (with the exception of perhaps Park’s [2010] model of meaning-making).

Human mandates urge individuals to make sense of their reality, something which is a “‘constant’ of the human condition” (Dervin, 1991, p. 64). But, to make sense, a gap is required over which to make sense. Old sense needs to have run out first; there needs to be “a missing piece in a picture of a situation” (Dervin, 1980, p. 44). While some gaps lead to discrete information seeking tasks such as finding out the location of a retail store or searching a government’s website to find out tax information, a gap may also be an opportunity for us to learn to behave in a different manner or feel differently about a particular issue speaking to the gap indicating a need for a feeling or sensation rather than just for information. However in terms of understanding the goal of religious thought and practice as sense making, I suggest that human beings are constantly faced with larger and more profound gaps than those aforementioned and that our making sense or making meaning of reality also involves the negotiation over

existential gaps that must be bridged from the moment that human beings are born.

These gaps are the largest in a human beings life, perhaps taking a whole life time to bridge.

These gaps are characterized by a human being's confrontation with his or her most profound existential issues: the purpose and meaning of life, death and afterlife, metaphysical questions, the problem of good and evil, and notions of identity. For example, "Who am I?" and "What is the meaning of my life" are information-seeking or meaning-making questions that derive from these existential gaps. James (1958/1902) provides notable examples:

The fact that we can die, that we can be ill at all, is what perplexes us; the fact that we now for a moment live and are well is irrelevant to that perplexity. We need a life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish, a good in fact that flies beyond the Goods of nature. (p. 121)

Like any other information need, these existential gaps may manifest, depending on the severity of the gap, as a feeling uncertainty, or anxiety or as some sort of viscerogenic need (Taylor, 1962). The experience of Weick's (1993) cosmology episode, "when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system," as "I've never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me" (p. 634) may illustrate this feeling. However, the benefit of these negative feelings, says Kuhlthau (2004) is that "Uncertainty due to a lack of understanding, a gap in meaning, or a limited construction initiates the process of information seeking (p. 92), allowing the individual to bridge the gap. Dervin (2003/1999) defines 'information' as "sense made" (p.150), so in order to complete the information-seeking task and reduce anxiety, sense has to be made in some manner, perhaps by ignoring the gap, but perhaps by turning to religion as a way to help make

sense of these existential concerns. The necessity of bridging these existential gaps is highlighted by Allport (1950) who writes, "Some therapists today incline to see in almost every neurosis an unsolved metaphysical issue" (p. 79) indicating that an inability to make sense of these gaps leads to a lack of well-being and that using the verbing "ignoring" as gap bridging may be detrimental in the long run. But here in lies the rub; Godbold (2006) notes that

Individuals may not search for information if they perceive that the gap is too big....Other situations in which the gap will appear to big are when the person feels they do not have time or cannot see how to proceed. They may not be able to see how to search usefully, they may not understand the problem enough or they may be unable to imagine the possibility of a solution. (p. 6)

This is very likely true for many individuals who have no idea where to look for help with their existential concerns. Godbold's further comments suggest that these existential concerns are too great for individuals to ever bridge in one life time, and yet humans will continue to do so because they are driven by their mandates. Godbold writes again,

Having first read Dervin's ideas some months after the unexpected death of my mother, I was immediately struck by the problem of an individual having a gap with no means to span it. Furthermore, that gap of mine remains: I still feel a need for information about death in general and about my mother's death in particular, information that I believe I will never obtain. It is plain that in some sense, some gaps may never go away. Yet life goes on and I am not still shivering by the gap. Instead, there seems to be a human ability to juggle many gaps simultaneously. Some problems may be left to one side for a time while the individual focuses on other issues." (p. 7-8)

To this, Savolainen (2006) concurs in that bridges may be constructed in phases and only partially crossed (p. 1121).

To further demonstrate that this existential gap is not merely a theoretical construct and to conclude this section, I have borrowed research from the fields of the psychology of religion and information behaviour to provide evidence to their existence.

More research is needed to give further conceptual clarity to this phenomena, but for the time being, I direct the readers attention to the following examples. To begin, Clemens & Cushing's (2010) respondents in their study of individuals conceived via artificial insemination searching for their fathers remarked: "I'm not just searching for answers in my career or my love life, but now I'm searching for answers in my own identity" to which Clemens & Cushing suggest "[the informant's] comment implies that the search for her donor is unlike a more common search for information about career or love life, information for which the general population might search" (p. 9). Another example is provided by Ulland & DeMarinis (2014) who, in their study of the way adolescents cope with existential information, have defined the term as "includ[ing] both the searching and longing for meaning and significance in life – and the interpretations and answers given in religious, spiritual and other types of worldview expressions. This search penetrates to the core of the personal level and is nested within and interacts with the societal and cultural levels" (p. 586). While these scholars do not explicitly write about an existential gap, its existence can be inferred from the atypical concerns expressed above as compared to other everyday life information seeking tasks.

Kirkpatrick (2013) explains that "Psychologists of religion have long sought to explain the pervasiveness of religion in terms of religious motivation: that is, the idea that religion somehow satisfies one or more 'fundamental' or 'basic' human needs or motives [such as a] resolution of existential concerns" (p. 130). Lastly, Baker (2004), when writing about information needs at the end of life, has termed "the meaning of eternity," "the ability to reflect on life and to gain a sense of inner peace," and "whether there is life after death" (p. 81) as spiritual information needs, also suggesting that perhaps

these stem from a similar place as a normal information need such as a gap but are profoundly existential in concern.

### **CRITICISMS OF GAP BRIDGING AND INFORMATION AS EXPERIENCE**

Dervin's Sense-making model posits that the Sense-making gap is crossed by bridging it. Bridges include "ideas, cognitions, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, values, feelings, emotions, intuitions, memories, stories, [and] narratives" (Savolainen, 2006, p. 1122) that allow an individual to reconstruct sense of their reality. Bridges can be crossed in religious ways. For example, Jennings (1982) writes, "Ritual action is a means by which its participants discover who they are in the world and 'how it is' with the world" (p. 113) suggesting an existential gap related to an individual's identity and purpose in the world is bridged and Michels (2011) describes how "prayer was used as a tool to understand information" (p. 3), or in other words, as a way to bridge the gap in religious understanding.

However, these bridgings seem to only allow a metaphorical understanding of how the bridge is actually crossed in the mind of the sense maker. Savolainen (1999) notes Dervin is "strangely vague about gap-bridging" (cited in Kari, 2001, p. 39) while Kari (2001) furthers:

[Gap-bridging] has by no means been elaborated to the same extent as the other phases. It is ironic that Sense-Making is concerned with almost everything that leads up to and succeeds sense-making, but says practically nothing about what and how meanings are actually made by the actor. The approach skates over the intriguing outlooks of experiencing the mental processing of senses and its potential genre-bound character. (p. 203)

Ultimately, these scholars are asking, "how is sense actually made in Sense-making?"

Perhaps this lack of understanding derives from a lack of understanding about the

human mind, and perhaps this suggests a need to examine the mind more closely in the field of Library and Information Science (please see my response to Question 2). But for the time being, hermeneutics, the study of how people interpret, provides the best answer to this question. Despite the above criticisms, Dervin (1999b) knows full well that Sense-making is an hermeneutical endeavour. She says “humans construct *interpretive* bridges over a gappy reality (p. 730, emphasis mine). However, scholars could benefit from an explanation from Dervin herself as to how hermeneutics fits exactly into the Sense-making paradigm.

Budd (2001) supplies that “Hermeneutics is a way to approach the life-world and being-in-the-world” (p. 277). Hermeneutics is the essence of what allows the Sense-making individual to continue forward with their human mandate to move through time and space. Kuhlthau (2004) writes that “interpretive task is central to the constructive process” (p. 22) suggesting that out of misunderstanding—the gap—involves a process of creating a new way of being-in-the-world<sup>2</sup>. Religion is in essence a pre-conceived hermeneutic, however at this level, it becomes the job of the individual to move beyond the manifest content of the religious tradition (i.e., holy texts, oral teachings) through a further hermeneutic endeavour to the definitive meaning (Palmer, 1969 in Budd, 1995, p. 307). This allows an individual to reconstruct their sense according to the definitive meaning.

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<sup>2</sup> This understanding or conceptualization is borrowed from Heidegger, and I only understand it really in a cursory manner as I have yet to read his works in any great depth so please forgive me if I have misunderstood some aspect of this concept. As far as I can interpret “being-in-the-world” describes a phenomenological ontology and suggests that it is impossible to understand our reality from a place other than our existence as it appears to us.

An instance or series of achieved hermeneutical understanding could potentially become tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is understood by Polanyi (1958) as a faculty that “underl[ies] our ability to perform tasks we find difficult to explain” (cited in Zappavigna-Lee & Patrick, 2008, p. 3657) and that since “explicit knowledge must rely on being tacitly understood and applied...all knowledge is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1969, p. 144 cited in Zappavigna-Lee & Patrick, 2008, p. 3657). Thus, sense in Sense-making could also be understood as a step in the process towards the hermeneutical understanding leading to action. A similar approach is explained by Yanchar, Spackman, & Faulconer who relate the notion of “antecedent familiarity.” They (2013) supply that it is “a type of proto-understanding...antecedent familiarity constitutes a basis for the negotiation of novel situations en route to further familiarity and concerned involvement” (p. 223); it is the faculty which allows things to become familiar to our minds. With familiarity, humans can more easily be engaged in actions that derive from their new understanding.

Savolainen's (2009) theory of ‘information use’ also connects hermeneutics with action. He defines information use to “denote the ways in which interpretations (knowledge) thus formed are employed in problem solving” (p. 2). However, he conceives of the hermeneutic event happening at the same time, or within the same context of human action and that the two cannot be separated. This is aligned with Dervin’s Sense-making theory as she also posits that an individual’s Sense-making cannot be separated from the situation and context that the Sense-maker finds him or herself. Savolainen (2009) writes:

This epistemology suggests that human action itself does epistemic work and that human action is a part practice as well as what is possessed in the head.

Epistemic work is generally defined as “work people must do to acquire, confirm, deploy, or modify what needs to be known in order for them to do what they do” (Cook and Brown 1999: 399). (p. 6)

Action in particular is important to the above theories because being-in-the-world necessarily involves *intentioned* action, even if these actions are considered mental. Intention implies that the reason why individuals are engaging with religion through an hermeneutical endeavour is so that they can continue to pursue the human mandate and move through time and space. When an individual searches for religious information to bridge their existential gap, he or she may understand that a mere intellectual understanding will not suffice to lead him or her to relieve their existential issue; the definitive or hidden understanding must be grasped and that only (potentially) occurs through the processes of tacitization, familiarity or use mentioned above. In other words, a hermeneutic understanding must be co-existent with action, it must be “in-the-world,” a part of experience for it to induce its transformative effect. Only when a hermeneutical endeavour is tied with action as it is described in the theories above, can it be considered “real” information that is derived from an existentially-concerned information-seeking process, as per Dervin’s definition because sense has been made. An intellectual understanding may be considered a sort of aborted or failed information-seeking event. As such, it could be said that individuals are searching for information as experience rather than information as knowledge.

## **THE BUDDHIST PATH AS SENSE-MAKING**

Buddhists believe that the reason why human beings suffer is because they are ultimately ignorant<sup>3</sup> about the way reality exists; otherwise stated, they are unaware of

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<sup>3</sup> The use of the word ‘ignorant’ is meant to be terminological rather than being insulting.



the true relationship between their mind and reality. Suffering occurs because reality exists in one way while ignorant beings live and govern their according to the way it appears in another. Ultimately, a dissonance occurs between the two. Jinpa (2000) explains:

This 'ignorance,' or avidya as it is called in the Buddhist parlance, is not a mere passive state of unknowing, nor is it a state of universal doubt along the lines of Cartesian universal scepticism. Avidya is directly related to one's own sense of self and identity. It is an attachment to a false notion of self. (p. 11)

In terms of Sense-making, it can be said that an ignorant being's Sense-making is 'wrong'. He or she is perceiving gaps in reality when there are none, especially in regards to the Sense-making surrounding the nature of his or her own self, mind and existence as Jinpa notes. Namely, ignorant beings conceive this self as permanent, to exist independently of both the mind and body, to be the most important 'self' in all of existence.

In order to 'correct' the Sense-making so that the dissonance between the way things exist and the way things are thought of too exist ceases, the Buddhist individual would engage in applying the teachings of the Buddha, called the Dharma, to one's life. Essentially, the Dharma can be understood as a Buddhist hermeneutic. The Buddhist tries to replace his own ignorant Sense-making with the Sense-making of Buddha, which does not experience any suffering because he has ceased making-sense in regards to an ignorant conception of self and reality. This application of the Buddhist hermeneutic is accomplished through meditation and the development of concentration. With the development of concentration, the individual is able to see more and more clearly the subtler incorrect forms of Sense-making and is able to apply a Buddhist

understanding in its place. Pagis (2010) notes the importance of this to the whole endeavour: “The observation of the present moment brings out the subtleties of experience that are commonly ignored in everyday life” (p. 480). On the subtlest level, the application of the Buddhist hermeneutic occurs by essentially forcing a Sense-making gap in the ignorant interpretation of reality, recognizing that it is the Sense-making itself that is causing the problem. The individual then bridges the gap through the application and re-application of the Buddhist hermeneutic, holding single-pointedly the special conclusions used to change the mind (e.g. that all phenomena are impermanent, compassion for the suffering of other living beings, that all phenomena lack inherent existence). This process in meditation is aided through the application of mindfulness outside of meditation sessions to the ignorant Sense-making that takes place and through the re-application of the Buddhist hermeneutic. Over time, and through the processes of familiarization and tacitization, the ingrained Dharma becomes tacit understanding “...a form of functioning by which an insight or learning has been integrated into a person’s everyday thoughts, feelings and actions” (Todres, 2000, p. 182) and the individual is said to have achieved a realization. That is, the understanding has become a permanent part of the individual’s Sense-making; effort is no longer needed to generate the insight, but arises naturally and effortlessly as the ignorant Sense-making did at one time.

The Buddhist path allows for an easy explanation of how sense can be made in a religious manner as Buddhist practice is attuned to its own Sense-making, as it were, through its focus on understanding the mind, its nature and functions. This application may be more difficult with another religious tradition. In the future, it may be beneficial

to engage in a thought experiment down this avenue and to compare these outcomes. It may reveal that only some religious traditions can be easily compared with Sense-making.

### **VIOLATION OF THE ETHOS OF SENSE-MAKING?**

Near the end of his dissertation, Kari (2001) wonders if objectivity is sought in regards to a Sense-making claim, or if any other evidence or sources put forth to refute it, does this violate the “ethos of Sense-making” by not allowing an individual to make sense as they naturally do (p. 206)? The Buddhist problem of ‘ignorance,’ I believe, presents a difficulty to the ethos of Sense-making (as I have described it: “any sense makes sense as long as it makes-sense”) because it also asserts that ‘unenlightened’ Sense-making is flawed in that leads to suffering. Dervin was more interested in the *hows* of Sense-making rather than the *whats*, she wanted to study how Sense-making happens across all human beings rather than debate about whether one instance of Sense-making is wrong or not or is superior to another. It is here where perhaps Sense-making does not connect to, or at least has some difficulties connecting to being the goal of religious thought and practice.

However, it is possible to frame an individual’s decision to adopt a religious Sense-making strategy over their own “natural” Sense-making within a Sense-making strategy. In this context, the religious Sense-making can be viewed as a better gap-bridger than the natural Sense-making because the individual has made a decision to change his or her Sense-making. Furthermore, one is also able to understand the challenge of one way of Sense-making against another within the boundaries of Sense-

making by understanding the influence of cognitive authorities and communities of practice upon an individual's Sense-making. Foreman-Wernet (2003) describes Dervin's Sense-making as a methodology that "also assumes that issues of force and power pervade the human condition and, thus, pays specific attention to forces that assists or facilitate movement in time space (e.g. freedom and creativity) as well as those that constrain or hinder it (e.g. structure and habit)...human beings are seen as being both affected by structural power and are themselves sites of power" (p. 8).

In regards to the effects of cognitive authority, Wilson (1983) points out that "If we had to depend entirely on ideas that we ourselves invented, we would make little sense of the world. We mostly depend on others for ideas, as well as for information about things outside the range of direct experience...Much of what we think about the world is what we have second hand from others" (p. 10). This quote aptly describes the Buddhist thinking in regards to cognitive authorities such as the Buddha himself, gurus, teachers, as well senior students. Buddhist practitioners rely upon those more experienced in applying Buddhist Sense-making to their lives to be able to more effectively apply it to their own. This reliance is fundamental to the Buddhist path. Together the cognitive authorities that are relied upon are called the "Sangha" and it is one of the "Three Jewels" of Buddhism along with the Buddha Jewel and Dharma Jewel. By relying upon the Three Jewels, one is lead to Enlightenment, the soteriological goal of Buddhist practice. The practitioner accepts the constraints and forces upon his or her Sense-making as he or she believes it will be beneficial.

The Sangha can also be considered a community which imposes similar forces and constraints upon an individual. Indeed, Chatman (1999) describes community and

imbues it with this sort of power: "Community in its most intrinsic sense is the most existential definition of who one is. Ultimately this means that the 'stuff' of one's world is made from such things as social heritage, language, and the myriad of social norms that govern collective behavior. Community, then, explains the totality of my world" (p. 211).

The community then is able to shape the Sense-making of the individual through the imposition of these collective ways of acting. Again, the practitioner would consider these beneficial because he or she wants to abandon the senses of community, and by association, the sense of self that is the source of the problem of ignorant beings.

Davies (2006) furthers the power of community by noting that this is the primary way in which members of the community learn (i.e, influence the minds of individuals and change their Sense-making), by "becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice" (p. 104).

### **ELIS OR BEYOND ELIS?**

Davenport (2010) lists Dervin's Sense-making as one of the popular everyday life information seeking (ELIS) methods. ELIS is primarily concerned with the information behaviours of individuals outside of work and scholarship contexts as often these behaviours may be imposed on individuals. It can be generally typified as concerning information behaviours associated with "the familiarity of activities and affairs, repetition, routine" (Kari & Hartel, 2007) of daily life. However, Clemens & Cushing (2010) challenge the notion of ELIS by presenting examples, such as the search for sperm donors by children of these donors and the search for information about birthmothers by adoptees, that may be normally considered ELIS due to its non-work nature and routineness but are rather something else. They believe that they are characterized

rather as “deeply meaningful and intensely personal with life-long impacts” (Clemens & Cushing, 2010, p. 1) and are thus not ELIS. They conclude their paper by suggesting that “information seeking behavior within some contexts should be explored as a third facet of life experience: the deeply meaningful and profoundly personal” (p. 1) indicating perhaps a third area of information behaviour research outside of work behaviours and ELIS.

However, religious behaviour could easily be considered ‘every-day life’ behaviour. Some people engage in religious practices daily or perhaps attend a service regularly. Yet when religious behaviour and Sense-making are compared and contrasted as they were in this paper, the “beyond” everyday life character of these is revealed since individuals are attempting in some instances to move beyond this worldly life. Are religious information behaviours simultaneously “situated and transsituated” (Dervin, 1999b, p. 733) as Dervin’s Sense-making individual might be? Or are religious pursuits better understood within a framework of ELIS, what Savolainen (1995) calls “mastery of life,” where a meaningful order or coherence is maintained in life (p. 264)? Does the Buddha’s middle way approach perhaps offer a solution, or is best to always consider them inhabiting this middle ground?

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this paper made an effort to discuss in which ways Dervin’s Sense-making and sense being made as a goal of religious thought and practice connected or failed to connect. These two concepts are connected by their practical synonymity with each other along with related concepts such as meaning-making and coping with reality,

amongst others. Since they were deemed so similar, they were discussed together using Dervin's Sense-making as a master model for them all. While following human mandates, the existential gap was put forward as a reason for ultimate information-seeking, a way to relieve existential angst and pursue religious behaviours. This was followed by a discussion of some criticisms of Dervin's gap-bridging and a suggestion that the essence of Dervin's Sense-making and sense making as a religious goal hinge upon hermeneutics. The Buddhist path was then taken as a specific example of these postulations in action, but the path also presented a potential violation of the ethos of Sense-making. This violation could be resolved however by understanding religious Sense-making through the lens of Sense-making, by understanding how cognitive authorities and community influence a Buddhist practitioner's Sense-making.

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