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Symbol, Meaning, and the Sacred: A Study on Contemporary Malaise from the Perspective of Logotherapy and Analytical Psychology

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Abstract

This theoretical essay investigates the relationship between contemporary psychological malaise and the impoverishment of the symbol, of meaning, and of the sacred. It sets out from the question of how the weakening of these three dimensions reverberates in human experience and in mental health. By means of interpretive reading and the critical articulation of classical and contemporary literature, foundational works of Logotherapy and Existential Analysis, of Analytical Psychology, and of the anthropology and phenomenology of religion, chiefly Frankl, Jung, Eliade, Campbell, and Diel, are placed in dialogue with recent scientific evidence on spirituality, religiousness, meaning in life, and mental health. The essay argues that the symbol constitutes a fundamental anthropological mediation between the immanent and the transcendent, and that its erosion deprives the individual of the narrative structures, myths, fables, and traditions historically responsible for the elaboration of the meaning of existence. The lack of meaning manifests clinically in existential frustration and in noogenic neurosis, with collective symptoms such as fatalism, provisional existence, collectivism, and fanaticism, whereas the weakening of the relationship with the sacred withdraws from the human being a resource whose positive association with mental health finds empirical support, albeit with modest effects conditioned by the way religiousness is lived. It concludes that the recovery of meaning, of values, and of contact with the sacred represents a relevant path for confronting contemporary malaise, requiring of the psychologist the integration of philosophical, spiritual, and anthropological dimensions into clinical practice.

Introduction

Over the last several decades, a transformation may be observed in the ways human existence is understood and experienced, marked by a growing valorization of immanent perspectives to the detriment of symbolic and transcendent references. Fairy tales, folklore, founding myths, and religion have been progressively set aside, in contrast with the overvaluation of technological means and of the instantaneous sensation of pleasure that follows from them. Authors of the past century, such as Campbell (1989), Diel (1991), Eliade (2018), Jung (2020), and Frankl (2019), had already warned about the consequences of the estrangement from the symbol, from meaning, and from the sacred.

When individuals are unable to situate themselves within their own existence, they run the risk of falling into deep anguish and despair. According to the psychiatrist Viktor Emil Frankl (2019), the advance of science brought countless contributions, yet it also proved harmful in certain respects. One of these was precisely the tendency to “mathematize” and “reify” everything, including human beings themselves, causing the human character and its essence to be lost.

This concern, originally formulated at the theoretical level, today finds support in a growing body of empirical evidence. Literature reviews indicate that spirituality and religiousness are associated with better mental health outcomes, particularly a lower prevalence of depression, suicidality, and substance use (Lucchetti, Koenig, & Lucchetti, 2021). A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies confirms this

association, albeit with a small effect (Garssen, Visser, & Pool, 2021), and a systematic review with young people aged 10 to 24 identified spiritual well-being as a protective factor against depressive symptoms (Aggarwal, Wright, Morgan, Patton, & Reavley, 2023). Within the field of studies on meaning, recent research has recovered mythological narratives as privileged structures for the construction of meaning in contemporary life (Abazari & Saarelainen, 2025). Such findings justify recovering, in a scientific key, the classical warnings about the erosion of the symbol, of meaning, and of the sacred.

Such concerns are far from foreign to the field of pastoral psychology. The care of persons has long attended to the ways in which meaning, symbol, and the sacred sustain or unsettle human life, and Frankl's logotherapy in particular has been received as a fruitful interlocutor for pastoral counseling and spiritual care, precisely because it locates the search for meaning within the spiritual dimension of the person (Kimble, 2000). The sustained attention that pastoral scholarship has devoted to the aesthetic and symbolic mediations of care, as in Carlin's (2019) argument for an aesthetic sensibility in pastoral theology, likewise signals the pertinence of revisiting how the impoverishment of symbol and sacred bears upon the accompaniment of those who suffer. It is within this horizon that the present essay seeks to situate its contribution.

Against this backdrop, the present article investigates the relationship between the lack of traditions, symbols, meaning in life, and references to the sacred, on the one hand, and the psychological malaise characteristic of contemporaneity, on the other. It sets out from the following guiding question: what relationship can be established between contemporary malaise and the impoverishment of the symbol, of meaning, and of the sacred? In order to answer it, the study seeks to understand how these dimensions are articulated in the constitution of human experience, conceptualizing symbol, meaning, and the sacred in light of Logotherapy, Analytical Psychology, the Psychology of Religion, and the anthropological studies of religion, as well as discussing in what manner their weakening may reverberate upon contemporary mental health.

In light of this theoretical trajectory, the work argues that the symbol constitutes a fundamental anthropological mediation of the experience of meaning, and that its erosion compromises contemporary processes of meaning-making, with relevant implications for the understanding of existential suffering and for psychological practice. In order to develop this argument, the classical formulations of these frameworks are placed in dialogue with recent scientific evidence on spirituality, meaning in life, and mental health.

As for the methodology, this is a theoretical essay of qualitative approach, developed by means of interpretive reading and the critical articulation of classical and contemporary literature. The corpus was composed of two groups of sources: (a) reference works of Logotherapy and Existential Analysis, of Analytical Psychology, and of the anthropology and phenomenology of religion, in particular Frankl, Jung, Eliade, Campbell, and Diel, selected for their conceptual centrality to the categories of symbol, meaning, and the sacred; and (b) scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals, including systematic reviews and meta-analyses on spirituality, religiousness, meaning in life, and mental health (Aggarwal et

al., 2023; Garssen et al., 2021; Lucchetti et al., 2021), as well as recent theoretical studies on myth and the construction of meaning (Abazari & Saarelainen, 2025) and on the spiritual dimension in psychology (Nascimento & Caldas, 2020).

The analysis is grounded in critical interpretation and in the interdisciplinary dialogue among these frameworks, seeking to make explicit the convergences, tensions, and complementarities that allow one to understand the psychological function of the symbol as a mediation of the realization of meaning and of the experience of the sacred, as well as its implications for the understanding of existential suffering and for psychological practice. From this perspective, the essay does not intend to establish causal relations nor to produce empirical generalizations, but rather to offer a theoretical contribution that broadens the contemporary debate on the interface among symbolization, spirituality, meaning in life, and mental health. The articulation among the sources made it possible to confront the classical hypotheses about contemporary malaise with current empirical evidence, lending the discussion a character that is at once conceptual and scientific.

The Symbol and Its Function in Human Existence

Before describing the specific origins of contemporary malaise, it is essential to define what a symbol is and what its impact upon human existence may be. Jung (2020) states that a symbol is “a term, a name, or even an image that may be familiar to us in daily life” (p. 18). It is something present in the everyday, on the plane of the trivial, yet it possesses a reach that extends beyond the immediate moment. The symbol has a transcendent character, for it irrupts within the immanent universe. As Jung (2020) affirms, “a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something beyond its manifest and immediate meaning” (p. 18). Still on this point, the Swiss psychiatrist adds that, upon entering the field of the symbol, the human mind is “led to ideas that lie beyond the reach of our reason” (Jung, 2020, p. 19). The author stresses that the symbol has a representative role: it simplifies what is complex and facilitates the transmission of messages. For Jung (2020), it is precisely because so much lies beyond the range of human understanding that symbolic terms come to stand for concepts we cannot fully define or grasp, which is why, in his reading, every religion resorts to a symbolic language and expresses itself through images (p. 19).

It bears emphasizing that the symbol is not restricted to the mythological or religious universe, but finds equal expression in the most ordinary practices of everyday life. Examples of this are traffic codes, emojis, flags, the alphabet, and algebraic notation. It should be noted that several of these examples, in a stricter semiotic vocabulary, would be classified as conventional signs, whose relation to what they designate is arbitrary and codified, rather than as symbols in the full sense employed here; the distinction adopted in this essay concerns less the internal typology of signs than the axis that runs between the immanent and the transcendent. Such manifestations, in effect, remain circumscribed within the material paradigm, that is, they refer to realities of an immanent rather than a transcendent character.

Although the symbol, in its essence, contains an intrinsically transcendent dimension, language, communication, and contemporary usages tend to reduce it to a merely material plane. In this way, some symbolic elements have lost part of their potency. Fire, for instance, in myths and religions, may represent reason, transformation, destruction, and illumination, among other meanings. In interactions on social media, however, the fire emoji tends to be restricted to a sexual insinuation or to a simple demonstration of interest in someone, which results in a limitation and an impoverishment of its original symbolic reach.

Paul Diel (1991) affirms that the origin and the comprehension of the mystery of human life become possible only by means of an image, that is, of a symbol. Jung (2020) advances a kindred point when he observes that the exploration of a symbol carries the mind toward ideas lying beyond the reach of reason: the image of a wheel may evoke the notion of a divine Sun, yet at that threshold reason must confess its incompetence, for to call something divine is only to assign it a name grounded in belief rather than in concrete evidence (p. 19).

The symbol does not possess a single genesis; that is, it does not derive from a single source. Jung (2020) affirms that the human being is capable of producing it both spontaneously and unconsciously, especially by means of dreams. In the oneiric universe, the symbol acts as a structuring element: it suggests decisions, integrates fragmented information from lived experience, and reveals aspects previously unnoticed by the dreamer. The dream, in this way, constitutes a privileged pathway of symbolic genesis.

Symbolic manifestation has accompanied human experience since the most remote times. The opening invocations of the Iliad and the Theogony, attributed respectively to Homer and Hesiod, are exemplary in this regard: in both, the poet appeals to a goddess or to the Muses to sustain and legitimate his song, illustrating the symbolic relationship between the human being and the transcendent. Such invocations configure an appeal to an inspiration that exceeds the poet himself, in which the subject resorts to the mediation of divine entities in order to illuminate the development of his narrative and to confer legitimacy upon it.

Following the same line of analysis, when one explores other symbols present in mythology, one observes the condensation of universal truths by means of poetic and metaphorical descriptions. An expressive example is the tragedy Prometheus Bound, by Aeschylus, which narrates the story of Prometheus, the mythological figure condemned by Zeus to remain chained to the top of a mountain, his liver devoured daily by an eagle. In the version presented by Aeschylus, Prometheus steals fire with the intention of repairing the error of his brother, Epimetheus, whose task had been to distribute attributes to the earthly creatures. Upon perceiving that only human beings had been left deprived of such qualities, Prometheus decides to correct the failure by offering them fire, which, in this context, symbolizes rationality and intelligence. In one of the scenes, Oceanus advises his nephew to recognize his situation and to moderate his temperament, reminding him that a new sovereign now governs the gods and warning that anger is an affliction which reasoned argument can cure (Aeschylus, 1964).

This myth makes evident the depth of the symbol. Paul Diel (1991, p. 31) warns that the excessive use of reason estranges the human being from the meaningful universe fostered by mythology:

For the exalted intellect, isolated from the spirit, the spiritual vision of the myths, the mystery, does not exist. It thinks it is sufficient unto itself, and it does not succeed, despite all its inventions. The inventions themselves turn against the human being who has lost the evolutionary direction. In vain does he seek to replace the meaning of life with progress. Life has sources of insufficiency and of suffering that are far too deep, tragic, and mysterious for progress to be able to remove them.

This analysis reveals the tragic character of the contemporary human condition, marked by the loss of meaning and direction. At this point, a convergence with Viktor Frankl may be observed, when he affirms that “increasingly, people have the means to live, but they have no reason for which to live” (Frankl, 2019, p. 131), attesting to the failure of technological and rational progress in responding to the most profound human needs.

The contemporary pertinence of this reading does not rest solely upon the classical authors. Abazari and Saarelainen (2025), articulating psychology and anthropology, demonstrate that mythological narratives mirror the central principles of current psychological models of meaning-making: the confrontation with a deeply impactful event, dissatisfaction with the present state, attempts at the elaboration of meaning, and the projection of a desired state. For the authors, myths not only preserve relevance in contemporary life but also possess considerable potential as structures capable of enriching the understanding of what makes life meaningful and of the paths by which individuals experience meaning. This convergence between comparative mythology and contemporary psychological research reinforces the hypothesis that the erosion of the symbolic-mythological repertoire deprives modern human beings of a historically central instrument of existential elaboration.

The myth, therefore, constitutes a privileged space of symbolic condensation, offering answers to the mysteries of the cosmos and of existence. Its function, however, goes beyond explanation: it acts as a bridge between the known and the unknown, between the immanent and the transcendent, between the mutable and the eternal. In the face of the constant transformations of the contemporary world, the symbol has been losing its place and its function. The erosion of symbolic language generates a grave consequence: the rupture with tradition. As Frankl (2019) warns, when reflecting on the crisis of meaning of the contemporary human being, once this bond is broken, the individual is cast into an existential crisis marked by uncertainty and emptiness, and, in this context, the importance of recovering the meaning of life is underscored.

The Dimension of Meaning in Human Life

Since the origins of language, human beings have sought to understand both their own existence and that of the world. In this direction, Campbell (1989) affirms that “throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under all circumstances, the myths of humankind have flourished; and these myths have been

the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind" (p. 15), thereby making evident the centrality of symbols in human life.

In this same direction, Paul Diel (1991, p. 206) observes that "in Greek mythology many symbolic figures are found whose signification bears a close relationship to medicine." From this perspective, the author explores the relevance of mythology and symbology as fundamental elements for the maintenance of mental health: "As for the relationship between psychic harmony and health, it is important to underscore that any mythic symbol, whether deities or monsters, possesses a signification in relation to the medical art. Symbolization as a whole serves to represent the healthy or diseased constellation of the psyche" (Diel, 1991, p. 206). In other words, the symbol plays an essential role in psychic structuring.

Thus, both Campbell (1989) and Diel (1991) elucidate the importance of the symbol in society and, in particular, in human life. The symbol, however, when taken in isolation, is not sufficient to orient existence. A morality that encompasses it and confers meaning upon it is necessary, a function historically performed by mythologies, fables, and folklore. The fable of the fox that had never seen a lion, for example, conveys as its moral the idea that habit softens even that which initially causes dread (Aesop, 2013).

The psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl, founder of Logotherapy and Existential Analysis, stresses that each epoch presents a characteristic pathology. In the period of Sigmund Freud, sexual frustration stood out; in the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler, the feeling of inferiority was emphasized. For Frankl (2016), however, it is necessary to recognize the "existence of the feeling of the lack of meaning and to observe it more closely, when we address the pathology of our time" (p. 11). The Viennese physician warns that modern human beings face intense existential questionings and that the absence of clarity regarding the meaning of life leads to psychic illness.

According to Frankl (2016), the root of this lack of meaning lies in the fact that, "unlike the animal, the human being has no instincts that tell him what he must do; and, unlike what happened in past centuries, the human being no longer counts on traditions that tell him what he ought to do; thus, he often seems no longer to know what he wants" (p. 17). In referring to traditions, the author encompasses the entire apparatus that once undergirded societies: literature, symbols, religion, and culture. As a consequence of this existential frustration, noogenic neurosis emerges, that is, a form of neurosis that originates not in psychological conflicts in the strict sense but in the spiritual or noetic dimension of the person, arising from conflicts of conscience, clashes of values, and, above all, from the frustration of the will to meaning. Frankl (2016) understands it as the crystallization of "frustration into neurotic symptoms" (p. 15).

This reading of the malaise characteristic of the epoch was not limited to Frankl but was also developed by Carl Gustav Jung (2020), founder of Analytical Psychology. In his diagnosis, modern rationalism, by destroying the capacity to respond to numinous ideas and symbols, has delivered the human being over to the psychic underworld: in believing himself freed from superstition, he has in fact forfeited his

spiritual values to an alarming degree, so that the disintegration of moral and spiritual traditions exacts a high price in the form of widespread disorientation and dissociation (Jung, 2020, p. 118).

Deepening his research, Jung (2020) collaborated with anthropologists and verified that “anthropologists have often described what happens to a primitive society when its spiritual values suffer the impact of modern civilization. Its people lose the meaning of their lives, their social organization disintegrates, and the individuals themselves fall into moral decadence” (p. 119).

The approximation between Frankl and Jung proposed here finds support in recent literature. Nascimento and Caldas (2020), in investigating the spiritual dimension in psychology from the standpoint of these two approaches, conclude that Logotherapy and Analytical Psychology present more approximations than divergences with respect to their philosophical influences and to their understanding of the importance of the conscious experiences of the human being with religiousness and spirituality, in the pursuit of the integration and wholeness of the dimensions that constitute the person, diverging, however, as to the foundation of the spiritual dimension in the human being. This convergence legitimizes the intertheoretical dialogue adopted in the present study.

The consequence of no longer knowing what one desires expresses itself, often, in the presence of anguish, emptiness, and, consequently, in the search for distractions. This anguish may be understood as a refusal of the call that life addresses to the individual, but also, as the existential philosopher Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (2018, p. 45) describes, “anxiety is the reality of freedom as possibility before possibility.” In other words, the human being becomes anguished before the possibilities opened by his freedom. For Kierkegaard (2018), this experience is possible only because of the transcendent characteristic of the human being, being a reality of a spiritual nature.

For Frankl (2019), responsibility and freedom walk side by side. To exist is equivalent to choosing among multiple possibilities, and each choice implies the sacrifice of the others. In this same direction, Lombo and Russo (2020) describe the human being as causa sui, cause of himself, though not in an ontological sense, since a finite individual cannot create himself from nothing, but in a dynamic-existential one: every free act shapes the personality in a determinate way, so that each person is, in the operative order, realized by himself. Because we are necessarily free, the realization of our existence depends upon us, whether we wish it or not (Lombo & Russo, 2020, p. 218).

In contemporaneity, a growing tendency toward estrangement from the responsibility that accompanies freedom may be observed, which intensifies states of anguish, suffering, and the sensation of a lack of meaning. The result of this flight is mapped by Frankl (2016), who identifies depression, aggressiveness, and addiction as fundamental symptoms of collective neurosis, to which are added other symptoms delimited by the Viennese psychiatrist throughout his work.

The first of these symptoms is termed the fatalistic attitude. In this condition, the person finds themselves surrendered to the power of destiny, assuming a posture of inertia before circumstances, which generates inevitable inner conflicts. Frankl (2018, p. 44) observes that “the human being has taken

flight from his deserted and empty interior" and, as a consequence, has promoted an acceleration of pace, whether in work, in study, or even in consumption. Such acceleration "represents an attempt at self-cure" (Frankl, 2018, p. 44). The less one knows the course of one's life and comprehends the meaning of one's existence, the more one seeks to compensate for this emptiness through the intensification of external activities.

The second is provisional existence, which consists in living the present in an unmeasured way, as if there were no future. Frankl (2018) warns that whoever lives in this manner "is subject to the domination of impulses" (p. 45). This restricts the perception of existential possibilities, impeding actions oriented toward the long term. The result is an incessant search for immediate, sensory, and pleasurable stimuli. Frankl (2018) stresses that this dynamic was widely observed among the prisoners of the concentration camps.

The third is collectivist thinking. With the weakening of religious institutions, which historically functioned as guiding references and existential foundations, and with the advance of rationalism, mass movements attained extraordinary proportions throughout the twentieth century. When individuals find themselves immersed in the mass, they tend to lose their singularity. In this context, individuality is diluted and personality is sacrificed in favor of collective homogenization (Frankl, 2018).

The last symptom is fanaticism, which arises as a direct consequence of collectivist thinking. "The subject induced by fanaticism does not see the personal being of the other, of the one who is not attuned to his thinking" (Frankl, 2018, p. 52). The fanatic does not admit divergences, validating only their own vision of the world. In this state, the subject becomes possessed by public opinion, relinquishes their individuality, and ceases to think for themselves: "if the human being of collectivist posture ignores his own personality, the fanatic ignores the personality of the other, of the one who thinks differently. He does not accept him; for him, only his own opinion holds value" (Frankl, 2016, p. 169).

In a similar vein, the essayist Jordan Peterson (2018), reflecting on the structure of belief, suggests that rationalism proved unable to furnish satisfying answers to fundamental human questions, and that the great rationalist ideologies of the twentieth century, whether fascist or communist, revealed their futility within a few generations despite their intellectually persuasive appearance.

Fanaticism, described by Frankl as the extreme stage of collective neurosis, reflects how traditional values and principles were replaced, in an unreflective manner, by purely rational constructions. This symbolic and spiritual emptying led contemporary human beings to seek meaning precisely in ideologies, which, ultimately, intensified their anguish and alienation. A comparable diagnosis had already been advanced by Nietzsche, for whom the collapse of the horizon of meaning sustained by monotheistic thought opens onto nihilism, to which he responds with the figure of the *Übermensch*, the human being capable of creating new values in place of the old (Nietzsche, 2016). Frankl (2016), in turn, argues that it is conscience that orients the human being before the consequences of the loss of meaning, such as totalitarianism and conformism. On the basis of this orientation, it falls to the individual not to invent values arbitrarily but to discover them and to realize them in the concreteness of

his existence. Frankl (2016) holds that a meaning is found and made real whenever one creates a work or experiences something or someone, and that to experience a person in this full sense is to love that person, grasping him or her in an individual uniqueness and irreplaceability that coincides with love itself (p. 40).

The values of creation, of experience, and of attitude refer to the three ways by which the human being may realize meaning. With respect to the value of attitude, Frankl (2016, p. 41) affirms:

Even when we are victims of a situation with no possible way out, when we are confronted with an incurable disease, for example, even then we are still able to find a meaning, and precisely the highest meaning for our life. It is in such moments that what we are worth is put to the test. These are the situations that most clearly allow one to perceive what the human being is and that of which he alone is capable.

Lombo and Russo (2020) recognize the contemporary difficulty in relation to values and diagnose a split between theoretical and practical truth, that is, between that which the individual recognizes as true, and therefore as a value, and the expression of that value in his everyday conduct. When this coherence is lacking, values end up appearing distant and without force, becoming a notion known only in theory, which favors axiological relativism and the loss of the capacity to judge rightly (Lombo & Russo, 2020).

Within this horizon, Lombo and Russo (2020), drawing on Max Scheler, present the human person as capable of directly intuiting values, which possess an objective hierarchical structure. In their exposition, Scheler distinguishes, among other categories, the values of the agreeable and the disagreeable, relative to the sphere of sensibility; the vital values, linked to the feeling of life, such as joy, courage, or anguish; the spiritual values, such as the beautiful, the just, and the true, which transcend biological laws; and the values of the sacred, embraced by a profound love and accessible through faith, adoration, or reverence. These levels express the quality and the relative position of each value within the context of human existence (Lombo & Russo, 2020, p. 290).

The authors emphasize, moreover, the transcendental dimension of values, pointing to three transcendentals that express the relationship between reality and the human person: *verum, bonum*, and *pulchrum*, which indicate the relationship with the intelligence and the will of the human being, who gathers, respectively, the intelligibility, the goodness, and the beauty of the real (Lombo & Russo, 2020, p. 292). Thus, the origin of authentic values is rooted in an ontological structure grounded in truth, goodness, and beauty. Emmerick and Zanatta (2023), however, warn that, in contemporaneity, beauty has been reduced to a utilitarian and aesthetic aspect, becoming merely a means for the pursuit of pleasure, which ends up suffocating the pathway of meaning.

According to Lombo and Russo (2020), values function as orienting criteria of personal existence. The self-realization of the human being will be all the more full the more it is oriented by elevated values, that is, values that are less relative and transient. When life is guided by criteria such as wealth, well-being, or pleasure, it becomes vulnerable to the instability and volatility of these sensible goods. By contrast,

orientation by stable and universal values magnifies human freedom, for it directs the spiritual potentialities toward realities that are not exhausted in themselves, such as friendship, solidarity, or the love of God, values that are unlimited and non-contingent (Lombo & Russo, 2020, p. 286).

The emptying of these values, however, favored the emergence of relativism and the loss of the axiological structure, including the very notion of the sacred. Jung (2023) analyzed the impact of the idea of the "death of God" and verified this movement in diverse cultures: "the wide diffusion of this symbol is proof of the universal presence of a typical process of the soul: the loss of the supreme value, which gives life and meaning to things" (Jung, 2023, p. 112). The loss of this reference not only fosters the crisis of meaning but also unleashes a religious crisis, marked by disconnection from the sacred. The absence of an absolute value disorganizes the hierarchy of values and amplifies contemporary malaise.

The Sacred: The Synthesis between the Symbol and Meaning

Beyond the symbol and meaning, there is yet a third element that superposes itself upon both: the sacred. For Mircea Eliade (2018), a first definition of the sacred is that "it is the opposite of the profane" (p. 17). The author explains that the sacred reveals itself, and to this event is given the name hierophany: "the history of religions, from the most primitive to the most elaborate, is constituted by a considerable number of hierophanies, by the manifestations of sacred realities" (Eliade, 2018, p. 17).

According to him, "modern man experiences a certain malaise before numerous forms of manifestation of the sacred: it is difficult for him to accept that, for certain human beings, the sacred may manifest itself in stones or trees, for example" (Eliade, 2018, p. 18). The sacred and the profane correspond, thus, to two modes of being in the world, two existential modalities. Whereas the former perceives reality as saturated with being, meaning, and perenniality, the latter reduces everything to literality. The modern person sees house, work, and utensils merely as objects, whereas for the *homo religiosus* these same elements may constitute a communion with the sacred (Eliade, 2018).

Eliade (2018) further sustains that both the sacred and the profane configure modalities of existence: "Ultimately, the modes of being sacred and profane depend on the different positions that the human being has conquered in the Cosmos, and, consequently, they are of interest not only to the philosopher but also to every investigator desirous of knowing the possible dimensions of human existence" (p. 20). In other words, societies that recognize the sacred assume a posture distinct from those that ignore it, and such a difference reverberates in a profound manner in the constitution of the individuals who partake of them.

The hypothesis that the relationship with the sacred reverberates upon mental health, central to this study, does not remain solely on the speculative plane. Lucchetti, Koenig, and Lucchetti (2021), in a review of the current scientific evidence, point to the existence of an ample body of research indicating the impact of spirituality and religiousness upon mental health, with emphasis on associations with lower depression, suicidality, and substance use, in addition to promising results in relation to post-

traumatic stress disorder, psychosis, and anxiety. The authors observe that the effects tend to be bidirectional and recommend, as a clinical application, the inclusion of the spiritual history in the assessment of all patients, in the direction of a more holistic and person-centered care.

It is fitting, nevertheless, to avoid overstating this evidence. Garssen, Visser, and Pool (2021), in the first meta-analysis dedicated exclusively to prospective longitudinal studies on the theme, pooling forty-eight studies across fifty-nine independent samples, found a small though significant association between religiousness/spirituality and mental health ($r = .08$, 95% CI [.06, .10]), warning that the findings are heterogeneous and that the magnitude of the effect is smaller than that reported in meta-analyses based on cross-sectional studies. In an analogous manner, Aggarwal et al. (2023), in a systematic review with meta-analysis of longitudinal studies with young people aged 10 to 24, verified that spiritual well-being tended to be protective against depressive symptoms, whereas negative religious coping, feeling abandoned or punished by God, tended to be associated with more depressive symptoms over time. It is not, therefore, just any form of religiousness that protects: the way in which the relationship with the sacred is lived proves decisive.

This empirical datum converges, in a notable manner, with the theoretical formulations reviewed here. The distinction between an integrative religiousness and a diseased religiousness was already present in Frankl (2023), for whom the repression of the transcendent dimension may provoke distortions and neuroses, insofar as the "relationship with transcendence is disturbed" (p. 64). This is the concept of unconscious religiousness: an unconscious relationship with God, a relationship with the transcendent that manifests itself as a dimension immanent to the human being, even though it often remains latent.

In the same direction, Peterson (2018) observes that the fundamental principles of the Judeo-Christian tradition continue to govern virtually every aspect of the individual behavior and the basic values of the typical Westerner, even one who is atheist and well educated. Thus, although social and technological transformations have altered the perception of the world, an essentially religious behavior persists: in Peterson's (2018) formulation, the modern person has become atheist in self-description while remaining, in attitude, evidently religious and therefore moral.

Complementing Frankl, Jung (2023) stresses that religion exercises a stabilizing function in human life, in contrast with scientific theories, marked by transitoriness: "one scientific theory is soon exchanged for another, whereas dogma endures for long centuries" (Jung, 2023, p. 64). For Jung (2023), this instability of scientific theories, when set against the permanence of religious symbols and dogmas, may disorient the human being and render him more vulnerable to psychopathologies. He adds that science, although useful, lacks a full apprehension of life, whereas religion appeals to the human drama, valorizing the experience of sin, penitence, sacrifice, and redemption. In his view, the predominance of reason over the experience of the sacred generates deleterious effects: the acceleration of life, the intensification of restlessness, and the growth of fear.

From this perspective, Paul Diel (1991) emphasizes that the essence of the human being lies in the search for meaning, something possible only through the development of interior quality, spiritualizing

oneself in the image of the absolute spirit. For him, “with the aid of weapons symbolically furnished by the divinity, the human being must combat the tendency toward the affective exaltation of desires, the erroneous and exalted imagination, the seductive monster” (Diel, 1991, p. 29). In this way, the author understands myths and religious narratives as representations of human conduct, revealing both the possibilities of alignment with the spiritual level and the tendencies toward perversion.

In this same direction, Campbell (1989) discusses desacralization, showing how transcendent elements were replaced by immanent references. He observes that “the idea of the nation, with the flag serving as totem, today serves as an element that aggrandizes the infantile ego, and not as an element that annihilates the infantile situation” (Campbell, 1989, p. 373). Despite this, Campbell (1989, p. 373) adds that “the way to become human consists in learning to recognize the lineaments of God in the prodigious modulations of the face of man.” In other words, even amid modernity, the sacred continues to manifest itself under new forms.

Although they set out from distinct perspectives, the authors converge in indicating that the lack of the sacred contributes decisively to contemporary malaise. As Eliade (2018) stresses, to deny the sacred does not mean to eliminate it, but only to displace it to other domains of experience. It may be affirmed, therefore, that the human being conserves a latent tendency toward the sacred, even though modern rationalism frequently suffocates it or hinders its expression, and the empirical evidence reviewed suggests that the healthy cultivation of this dimension reverberates, albeit modestly, upon mental health.

Final Considerations

Returning to the question that opened this study, it is now possible to draw together the threads that connect contemporary malaise to the impoverishment of the symbol, of meaning, and of the sacred. The pertinence of such an undertaking derives from the current context, in which identity crises, spiritual emptying, and growing existential demands present themselves with increasing frequency within psychological and pastoral practice alike.

In response to the research problem, the relationship identified may be formulated as follows: the erosion of the symbolic dimension compromises the mediation between the immanent and the transcendent, depriving the individual of the narrative structures, myths, fables, traditions, by which the meaning of existence was historically elaborated (Abazari & Saarelainen, 2025; Campbell, 1989; Diel, 1991); the lack of meaning, in turn, manifests clinically in the existential frustration and the noogenic neurosis described by Frankl (2016, 2018), with their collective symptoms, fatalism, provisional existence, collectivism, and fanaticism; and the weakening of the relationship with the sacred withdraws from the human being a resource whose positive association with mental health finds empirical support, albeit with modest effects conditioned by the way religiousness is lived (Aggarwal et al., 2023; Garssen et al., 2021; Lucchetti et al., 2021).

Although they set out from distinct theoretical perspectives, Diel, Campbell, Eliade, Frankl, and Jung converge in indicating that the aggravation of contemporary malaise is related to the erosion of the

symbolic dimension, to the loss of meaning, and to the weakening of the notion of the sacred, a convergence corroborated by the contemporary literature that approximates the two psychological approaches privileged here (Nascimento & Caldas, 2020). The advance of rationalist thought, although fruitful in technical and scientific terms, also favored the growth of rigid ideologies, of scientism, and of identity and existential crises.

It is fitting to register the limits of this study: since it is a theoretical essay, there was no systematic protocol of search and selection of sources, and the empirical evidence mobilized indicates associations, generally of small magnitude and possibly bidirectional, rather than causal relations among spirituality, meaning, and mental health. The relationship established between contemporary malaise and the impoverishment of the symbol, of meaning, and of the sacred must, therefore, be read as a theoretically plausible and empirically supported articulation, not as a conclusive demonstration.

In this context, the substitutes for mythology, literature, and religion prove incapable of offering adequate answers to existential questions, weakening the very structure of the human being. This diagnosis carries a specific weight for pastoral psychology and spiritual care. If the erosion of symbol, meaning, and the sacred lies at the root of a significant part of contemporary malaise, then those who accompany others in situations of suffering, whether chaplains, pastoral counselors, or clinicians attentive to the spiritual dimension, are called to recover the symbolic and narrative resources through which persons have historically made sense of their existence. The contemporary psychologist, no less than the pastoral caregiver, thus needs to move beyond the mere study of behavior and to integrate philosophical, spiritual, and anthropological dimensions into practice, a direction that finds support both in the phenomenological-existential tradition and in the clinical recommendations of recent empirical literature, such as the inclusion of the patient's spiritual history in psychological assessment (Lucchetti et al., 2021). Reaffirmed, then, is the urgency of recovering meaning, values, and contact with the sacred as possible paths for confronting contemporary malaise and for informing the practice of care.

To the researchers interested in the theme, the undertaking of new empirical studies is recommended, especially of a phenomenological nature, with interviews that allow one to ascertain the relationship among symbol, meaning, the sacred, and contemporary malaise in the discourse of the participants, elucidating subjective aspects and the social perception of those interviewed, including in Brazilian samples, still underrepresented in the international literature (Aggarwal et al., 2023).

Declarations

Competing interests:

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics declaration

Not applicable. This study is a theoretical essay that did not involve human participants or animals, and therefore did not require ethics committee approval or informed consent.

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Author Contribution

V.L.S., S.E., and C.Z. jointly conceived and designed the study. V.L.S. carried out the bibliographic search, conducted the interpretive analysis of the sources, and prepared the initial draft of the manuscript. S.M.E. and C.Z. contributed to the theoretical framing of the argument, provided critical revision of the successive versions for important intellectual content, and supervised the development of the work. V.L.S., S.E., and C.Z. all contributed to the writing of the main manuscript text, and all authors read and approved the final version to be published.

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