Comparative Analyses of Theosis, Theory of the True Self and Search for Meaning in Life: Diverse Approaches to Self-transcendence

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Abstract. Contemporary psychology considers ST a developmental marker associated with the highest psychospiritual growth and maturity (Garcia-Romeu et al., Garcia-Romeu et al. 2015) and an indicator of striving for broader fulfilment of human potential (Koltko-Rivera, Koltko-Rivera 2006). However, despite the significance of ST for human development, its aspects in contemporary society are mostly neglected (Joas, Joas 2015), and self-actualisation is recognised as the highest human goal (Koltko-Rivera, Koltko-Rivera 2006). In contrast, religion (in particular several Christian traditions) and positive psychology are two fields where ST is recognised as an ultimate goal of human development. That raises a tension between two modes of worldviews (self-actualising and self-transcending), and I wish to contribute to that issue by approaching ST from a religious and psychological perspective to put the two into a more productive dialogue using examples of three specific approaches. More specifically, the concept of theosis, theory of the true self of Thomas Merton and theory of meaning in life (MIL) from positive psychology will be considered to advocate for the significance of ST in light of its present secular rejection. The presented project also assumes empirical study, which will develop a model of ST based on self-reported narratives data on a sample of English-speaking adults in three categories in equal groups of about 10 in a total of 30.

Keywords: self-transcendence · theosis · Thomas Merton · meaning in life

1   Introduction

Following the Orthodox dogmatic, in Hesychast spirituality, the goal of human life is in achieving theosis or God's likeness; according to Thomas Merton, the ultimate target of humans is to discover and realise one's true self; following positive psychology, humans aim to find the meaning in life. What can be a common ground for those theories? They all explain different approaches to self-transcendence (ST). According to modern psychology, ST is a developmental indicator linked with the greatest psychospiritual growth and maturity (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015). From a phenomenological standpoint, ST conveys the dissolution of self-boundaries and a broad sensation of connectivity with the Divine, the Universe, or other individuals and objects (Yaden et al., 2017). According

to recent studies, humans are increasingly seeking escape from the understanding of human existence and behaviour reduced to a biological perspective (Lacatus, 2020) and strive for broader fulfilment of human potential. However, despite the significance of ST for human development, its aspects in contemporary society are mostly neglected (Dein, 2020; Joas, 2015; King & Napa, 1998; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007), and self-actualisation is recognised as the highest human goal (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). In contrast, religion (in particular several Christian traditions) and positive psychology are two fields where ST is acknowledged as an ultimate goal of human development.

However, the negative image of Christianity among the non-religious population contributes to the low interest in ST of Christian origin among non-Christians. In the meantime, recently explored phenomena such as relocation of transcendence (Thurfjell et al., 2019) or Implicit Religion (Schnell, 2012) show that humans strive for ST outside of religious origin also. Moreover, in the latest version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, ST is considered the highest human need. However, in modern psychology, the earlier version of Maslow's hierarchy, with self-actualisation at the top, is utilised (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). That raises a tension between two worldviews having in foundation strives for self-actualisation or self-transcendence (Nilsson, 2013; Nussbaum, 2009; Taves et al., 2018). ST becomes a particular worldview marker and, in the meantime, a category that connects diverse worldviews and people, whether religious or not.

To contribute to that problem, I identify the lack of interaction between psychological and religious views of ST and wish to put the two into a more productive dialogue. To achieve that, I will consider and compare three approaches to ST from religious (Christian) and psychological non-religious (positive psychology) points of view. More specifically, I wish to analyse diverse ways of ST as shown in the concept of theosis, theory of the true self of Thomas Merton and view of meaning in life (MIL) from positive psychology (to advocate for the significance of ST in light of its present secular rejection. The presented paper is a part of the literature view for the PhD project with the same title, also assumes an empirical study. The empirical research will develop a model of ST based on self-reported narratives data on a sample of English-speaking adults in three categories in equal groups of about 10 in a total of 30.

In the mix, those approaches to ST were not analysed, and the study aims to search for a common perspective in their strive to ST. For that reason, I will refer to the literature where those approaches are analysed separately, focusing on the research aim. Besides, my aim also is to describe three particular theories with a practical emphasis on achieving ST. For each approach, I will question: What is that and how to achieve that? Firstly, the introductory facts on ST will be presented; secondly, the theory of theosis and sacramental approach to ST will be analysed; thirdly, the theory of the true self of Thomas Merton and contemplative approach to ST will be considered; and finally, the role of ST in the theory of MIL will be questioned; in conclusion, the analysed results will be compared.

2 ST (Self-transcendence)

2.1 Introduction

Humans were always striving for something outside of themselves (Frankl, 1966). ST as a phenomenon expresses dissolving self-boundaries and a sense of connectedness with other persons and objects in a broad sense (Yaden et al., 2017). ST was recognised as a crucial factor in human development and meaning-making by the early existential and humanistic psychologists Frankl (1966) and Maslow (1969). Also, ST is a topic that pertains to the higher levels of psychospiritual development and maturity (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Abraham Maslow (1969), who granted ST a top place in his hierarchy of human needs, presents the following definition of transcendence:

Transcendence is the highest and most inclusive or comprehensive degree of human awareness, behaving and connecting to oneself, significant others, human beings in general, other species, nature, and the cosmos as ends rather than means (p.66).

Frankl (1965) adds to that definition that spirituality implies transcendence, and only by transcending their humanity people can become their true selves. Haidt and Morris (2009) argues that the capacity for self-transcendence is a "fundamental part of being human". Finally, Frankl summarises that transcendence is "the essence of our existence" (Frankl 1965, p. 100).

2.2 Manifestations and Classification of ST Experience

Intensive manifestations of ST – such as mystical or peak experiences – are explored in transpersonal psychology. In contrast, manifestations of ST from the other side of the emotional spectrum (such as inspiration or awe) have been covered by standard psychology (Levin & Steele, 2005). Modern-day researchers explore the reasons, duration, and nature of the ST and try to classify it. For example, Levin and Steele (2005), distinguish two sorts of ST experiences: green and mature. Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015) differentiate between the long-term and short-term effects of the ST experience. McCarthy et al. (2018) describe the conceptual model of ST experience with five sectors: creativity, relationships, introspection, contemplation, and spirituality.

2.3 Thirty-Four Alternatives of Transcendence

In Maslow's (1969) opinion, ST is the stage of development that assumes a "strong and free identity." He highlighted the thirty-four different alternatives of transcendence realisation. Among them are transcendence on a personal level: transcending of own weakness, negatives, fears and dependencies, transcending the current situation, the past, and finally, of the own will. Also, the transcendence can be realised on social and cosmic levels: transcendence of space and time, gaps between the facts and values, transcendence of individual differences and other's opinions, polarity We-They, ego transcendence in the sense of love to others, cosmic consciousness and mystical experience, and finally godlikeness (Maslow, 1969). We will see further many of those dimensions in the analysed approaches to ST.

2.4 Empirical Studies of ST

Approximately a third of people in diverse cultures report having experienced ST, even though this phenomenon is frequently pathologised (Yaden et al., 2017). Also, several scales are already established to quantify ST in empirical studies, according to Dein (2020). The significant expressions of ST have been recognised as an enhanced sense of connectedness to the universe or the divine and a reduced sense of self. Though ST is a worldwide, cross-cultural, and intensely emotional phenomenon for the categories of religiosity and spirituality, the ST experience is more primordial. Some rituals or actions in the most famous religions enable one to go beyond one's ordinary life and experience greater reality (Dein, 2020). Studies show that ST experience positively impacts psychological well-being (Maslow, as cited in Levin & Steele, 2005). Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015) distinguishes between the long- and short-term aftermath of TE. The short-term effects contribute to anxiety reduction, energy boosts, insights, socialisation, and a permanent positive impact. Long-term effects influence one's reorientation, worldview, self-awareness, an increased desire to care for others, and changes to new patterns of thinking or behaviour (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015).

3 Theosis

3.1 Introduction

Theosis or deification is a higher degree of spiritual transformation in a system of Hesychast spirituality. The Hesychast spirituality, more traditional for Eastern Christianity, integrates and organises beliefs, experiences, and practices with the aim of spiritual development. As indicated by the numerous publications in Christian theology, there has been a rebirth of interest in theosis in recent decades. In the description of the concept of theosis, I will refer to the four modern sources identified as influential in the contemporary study of theosis. Russell (2004) provides a concise survey of patristic perspectives of theosis. Gavrilyuk (2009) discusses its theological perception in the West. Kharlamov (2008) focuses on the concept's critique and modern interpretations; Irvine (2012) raises an issue on an adaptation of theosis in modern times. Firstly, three types of definition of theosis and its historical overview from the 8th century up to now will be given; secondly, its phenomenological nature and sacramental approach to theosis will be discussed; finally, the applications of theosis in the West, link to positive psychology, understanding of theosis as a worldview and issues of applying the concept of theosis in modernity will be presented.

3.2 Three Types of Definition

Norman Russell is considered a modern leader in the study of theosis or deification. In 2004, he released *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, a concise overview of the topic from the Greek-Roman world to modern perspectives. Russell distinguishes three types of deification language used by the early Christian Fathers: nominal, analogical, and metaphorical. In the nominal definition, deification is an honorary title equivalent to the Son of God's status by nature but earned by humans by

grace. The metaphorical definition is divided into two subtypes: ethical and realistic. The ethical definition posits that achieving likeness to God is possible through developing virtues and purification from the passions. In that approach, ascetic efforts aid in transcending human nature's bodily essence. In the realistic definition is claimed that a genuine alteration of human nature occurs due to participation in God (2Pet: 1–4). The realistic definition, on the other hand, combines ontological (through incarnation) and dynamic subtypes (through sacramental participation in Baptism and Eucharist) (Russel, 2004). As the sacramental approach to theosis will be analysed empirically, the emphasis will be on the realistic dynamic definition of theosis.

3.3 Historical Overview from 8th to 20th Century

The topic of deification was developed interstitially in patristic theology until the 8th century (Kharlamov, 2008). As Gavrilyuk (2009) claims, since the 8th-century, the concept of deification has stood at the centre of the soteriology by the majority of the Greek fathers. Russel (Russell 2004) adds that in that time, theosis attained its eschatological pinnacle and was proclaimed the ultimate spiritual goal of life. Later, with Symeon, the New Theologian in the 10th-11th centuries and Gregory Palamas in the 14th century, deification took on an experimental dimension in Hesychast prayer. The stagnation of the paradigm began with the fall of Constantinople in the 14th century, and only four centuries later, with the resurrection of Philokalia[1]. This concept again occurred. The academic interest in theosis rose in the twentieth century and was renewed by Russian and Greek theologians (e.g., Vladimir Lossky, John Meendorf, John Zizoiulas). As a result of that arduous journey, theosis has become an important domain in Orthodox theology that presently garner interest in the West (Russel, Russell 2004).

3.4 Contemporary Stage of Theory

In the second half of the 20th century, the supportive voices of scientific inquiry of irrational thinking and mystical experiences (e.g., Maslow, Jung) influenced the rise of interest in that subject (Kharlamov, 2008). Gavrilyuk (2009) also emphasised the current stage of theosis development as a revival of interest. The earlier opinion of "heresy or poetic nonsense" has vanished from academic discourse. The renaissance of deification in modern systematic theology can be explained by the striving of Western theologians to connect with "typical Eastern ideas" more constructively. Moreover, the active recognition of deification contributes to increasing ecumenical dialogue. Finally, Gavriluyk assumes that in the future, the doctrine of deification may affect the formation of a broad sacramental and synergetic anthropology (Gavrilyuk, 2009).

3.5 Theosis as a Phenomenon

As Russel (Russell 2004) describes, theosis, in the opinion of Symeon the New Theologian, is the restoration of one's original likeness to God and "fulfilment of all desires" (Hymn 23.413–20). Remarkably, moral improvement plays a critical role in the ability

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[1] Essential for Orthodox theology collection of monastic spiritual experiences.

to experience deification in real life. However, as Gregory Palamas claims, deification is a supernatural gift, and for deified individuals, passions have no longer impact. Moreover, according to the conception *of Theoria physice* by Maxim the Confessor, there are three steps to perfection or deification: the first step is catharsis or purification; the second is contemplation; the third is perfection or theosis. In the second step of spiritual development, believers obtain a vision of the genuine nature of things, and their connections (Russel, Russell 2004), which was one of the significant outcomes of spiritual life for Merton. Kharlamov (2008) adds that, in an eschatological sense, deification is an ongoing vision and contemplation of God combined with continued participation in Divine glory, and this process starts already in the earthly life. The degree of human involvement in God is rated as "as far as possible" (Kharlamov, 2008).

3.6 Sacramental Approach to ST

The concept of deification has its unique focus on realistic participation in God by sacramental life in the church. The sacramental approach is most referred to by patristic writers (especially among names such as Cyril of Alexandria, Dionysius the Areopagite, John Damascene, and Symeon the New Theologian) and as an approach for ST has no analogies in other fields. The magnificent "God gives His flesh to His saints to deify them," exclaims Symeon, the New Theologian, explaining the sacramental approach through the Eucharist (Eth.1.10.118–24). However, in most discussions in the West, this approach is conventionally ignored (Gavrilyuk, 2009). Kharlamov (2008) also emphasises the importance of the sacramental life for deification, stating that participation in God leads to body incorruptibility, which is one of Saphrony Sacharov's central topics in his reflection on saints' relics (Kharlamov, 2008). Empirically the sacramental approach to ST was not examined before. Only one study with a close focus was identified: Naumescu (2012) did an ethnographic study of novices in an Orthodox monastery and discovered the role of control of feelings and obedience to a spiritual father as necessary for subsequent transformation in Heshchast spirituality and obtaining theosis.

3.7 Theosis in the West

Gavrilyuk (2009) presents an impressive overview of contemporary research on theosis, showing the renaissance of that theme in modern systematic theology. In his text, Gavrilyuk accents the recognition and prolonged presence of the theme of deification in Western theology. Many Western theologians approach various versions of deification in their writings: Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Gavrilyuk notes that there is evidence that Martin Luther, particularly in earlier periods, refers to the topic of deification. That shows that the theme of theosis is not alien to Western Catholic and Protestant theology. According to Billings (2007), John Calvin also refers to the theme of theosis in his sacramental theology, but it lacks an understanding of the Eucharist as the primary vehicle of theosis. A wide range of thinkers, from Karl Barth to Martha Nussbaum, has also mentioned deification in their writings (Kerr, 1997). In Gavrilyuk's opinion (2009), the most common approach to deification in the West is to contrast it to the concept of justification. There are two major differences between the two doctrines: firstly, all things participate in God as his creation and are

thus capable of transformation according to theosis, whereas rational beings exclusively deserve justification; secondly, a faith-based understanding of justification contrasts with spiritual battles (to overcome vices and climb into the virtue ladders defined by John the Climax) recognised as an essential part of Orthodox spirituality (Gavrilyuk, 2009).

3.8   How the Concept of Theosis is Linked to Positive Psychology

Kharlamov (2008) further emphasised that theosis differs from medieval views of Christianity as it focuses on the positive transformation of the human rather than drawing attention to the horrifying imagery of the blazing fire of hell. God is working to restore Divine harmony throughout the created universe, and this therapeutic effect is also a product of God-human interaction (Kharlamov, 2008). A similar trend may be observed when comparing positive psychology to classical psychology. If last focuses on psychological problems and diseases, positive psychology concentrates on increasing positive factors in human life, such as happiness, well-being, and finding meaning in life. Only a few studies specifically address that area, illustrating the lack of studies and contradicting empirical results within the field. Three studies distinguish the relation between theosis and positive psychology in all issues of the primary journals in positive psychology, The Journal of Positive Psychology and the Journal of Happiness Studies. Stavros (2012) finds correlations between ancient Christian concepts with positive psychology and suggests a more profound exploration of that connectivity. Nelson and Slife (Nelson and Slife 2017) show parallel in both approaches, specifically in the aim to uncover the full human potential. The most significant issues referring to that connectivity are differences in understanding of suffering (negative in positive psychology and with a possible positive effect on spiritual and psycho-emotional development in Christianity), the individualistic character of virtues in positive psychology (in contrast with communal in Christianity) and neglection of ST sources of MIL in the hedonistic model of MIL (Nelson & Slife, 2017). Speed (2018) find evidence that religion brings a sense of meaning, which positively affects well-being; however, non-religious individuals frequently hold identical well-being records, and it is unclear what worldview is more beneficial in terms of well-being, religious or non-religious.

3.9   Theosis as a Worldview

According to Kharlamov (2008), Pseudo Dionysius was the first to develop a comprehensive deification theology and invent the phrase "deification worldview" (which means recognising the divine presence as a cause and source of beauty, unity, and harmony of the whole). According to Maximus the Confessor, the principle (the logos) of nature and natural law is actualised following spiritual law. In the notion of theosis, the cosmological, Christian, anthropological, eschatological, and soteriological components merge into a singular, individual, and universal process, arguing that everything created is in the process of being transformed or deified (Kharlamov, 2008).

3.10   Theosis in Modernity

If Russell's primary focus is a historical review of theosis with defining categorisation, then for Irvine (2012), the focus is how to apply the idea of deification to modern reality.

He poses a similar concern to mine: can the notion of theosis be applied without following a specific worldview that contrasts significantly with everyday life? The supernatural vocabulary of patristic writers and their specialised terminology limit the scope of a broad discourse of deification in the 21st century. Therefore, the use of multidisciplinary language can contribute to a more fruitful discourse. Such universalism can sometimes result in a loss of conceptual depth, but the outcome of increased interest — the translation of theosis theory into postmodern philosophical and psychological frameworks - overweight this disadvantage.

3.11 Conclusions

Based on analyses of that sources, I find that the sacramental approach, ascetic lifestyle, purification from the passions, and specific prayer practice are all recognised as tools for obtaining theosis. However, the sacramental approach to theosis that most patristic writers refer to has no parallels in other domains and has not been empirically studied before. Baptism and the Eucharist are the two fundamental sacraments, each seen as a divine birth and actual participation in Christ's deified body and blood. As a result, the empirical examination of the sacramental approach to ST will fill existed gap in providing the first empirical insights into the approach to ST that has no analogies. However, it is critical to emphasise that as children of God, believers can gain the power to become gods, not in the ontological sense but in the adaptive meaning. As a result, believers seeking immortality and incorruptibility remain ontologically human. Deification creates a paradox: we gain the ability to know God, but we never know Him. We can see God, but he is invisible to us. We have a similarity with God, but the difference between humans and God is impenetrable. We might become gods, but we can never be like God. Consequently, theosis is both experience and mystery for the patristic authors, hiding the Divine Love (Kharlamov, 2008). However, there is an opinion that a sacramental approach without preliminary moral reform and further spiritual guidance with a commitment to Orthodox dogmatic is not applicable (Johnson, 2010).

4 True Self

4.1 Introduction

In response to that opinion, Thomas Merton, in his theory of the true and false self, developed an adaptation of theosis. Merton merges different religious concepts with sociological, philosophical, and psychological content to define the true self. He critically reframes several conditions for deification: he is against strict ascetics and constant concentration on God as unrealistic. Instead, Merton points out the importance of contemplation as an activity with deep self-exploration. He proposes spiritual development to overcome the modern obstacles to true self-cultivation: the influence of alien opinions, stereotypes, modern trends, misconceptions, competition in material possessions and even the use of comparison as a primary logical tool. The theory of Thomas Merton is primarily analysed based on the primary sources (Merton, Merton 1948, Merton 1949, Merton 1969 1972/2013, Merton 1973). In Merton's view, the true self is a perfected

structure of every individual with apparent reference to the image of God. To achieve the state of the true self, it is critical to pass through the several stages of self-improvement, including transformation, recognition and identification with the ultimate source of being (Merton, 1948). Merton points out the importance of contemplation for the true self cultivating as an activity where deep self-exploration has a place. In contrast, the opposite to the true self – the false self (compilation of alien's opinions, stereotypes, modern trends, misconceptions) cannot survive during contemplation. To define that approach to ST, firstly, I give short biographical facts about Thomas Merton; secondly, I explain his theory of the true self and how the transformation into the true self happens; finally, then I show the similarity of the concepts of theosis and the true self and demonstrate the relevance of the theory of the true self for modern people**.**

4.2   Thomas Merton

As Sandström (2013) claims, the life of Thomas Merton itself is evidence of his continued openness and search for his true self. Originating from a Protestant background, Merton, in his youth, shifted to atheism to later become a Catholic monk with a profound interest in the mystical theology of Catholicism and Orthodoxy, along with curiosity in other religious traditions, such as Sufi Islam and Zen Buddhism (Sandström, 2013). In the opinion of Sandström (Sandström 2013), Thomas Merton was one of the Roman Catholic monks who captivated the most significant interest in the 20th century. In his binary theory of self, Merton locates the true self at the highest point of human development, mixing the idea of finding the self-identity with an ultimate goal of spiritual life according to Orthodox and Catholic traditions of Christianity (Conn, 1981). The true and false self theories and the linked notion of contemplation are believed to be the most regularly alluded to in Merton's theology, and their perspective shifts in line with Merton's changing interests (Inchausti, 2014). Merton's earlier works were more imaginative, enthusiastic, and influenced primarily by Roman-Catholic Christian mystics such as St. Augustine, St. Bernard, and Saint John of the Cross. The works of middle Merton were then mainly influenced by Orthodox authors. In contrast, the late Merton displayed a more mature and rigorous approach that combined all prior changes with a strong influence of Eastern religions, notably Zen Buddhism. Many researchers have been drawn to Merton's comprehensive and original approach to Christian theology, which has resulted in the creation of hundreds of works based on his ideas.

4.3   Definition of the True Self

In Merton's (1949) opinion, the true self is the "secret" of human identity that is located in God's Love and mercy; and identification with the ultimate source of "reason and fulfilment's existence" (Merton, 1949, p. 13). Also, the true self is a "point untouched by sin and by illusions" (p. 158), a "point of pure truth […] which belongs entirely to God" (Merton, 1966, p. 158). The true self is 'the life of the spirit in the moments of the highest fullness of our being' (Merton, 1968/2014, p.5). The primary issue in achieving the true self, according to Merton (1968), is in uncovering this "pure diamond" (p. 158) in the "centre of our being" (p. 158). Search for the true self – is defined by Merton as the discovery of "myself in discovering God" (Merton, 1949, p. 13). Additionally,

Merton (1949) asserts that only God and His grace can grant a capacity to find the true self (pp. 13–14). By this belief, Merton (1949) means that no particular formula or strict methodology can guarantee success in searching for the true self. It is a multi-dimensional long-term transformation of our conscious and unconscious nature.

However, as Merton (1968) emphasises, "the gate of heaven is everywhere" (p. 158); as a result, there are some specific mental and social activities that aid in the discovery of one's true self. He identifies a variety of internal qualities such as love for others, deconstruction of the ego boundaries, liberation from the pleasure principle, humility, viewing the world from the perspective of the inner self, and various auxiliary activities such as prayer, meditation, and creativity facilitate the true self uprising. Several external factors, such as solitude or being in nature, also lead to discovering the true self. Exclusion of activities that promote the growth of the false self, on the other hand, also helps the growth of the true self. Merton (1949) observes that imitating other people's personalities, following popular trends, living "in a hurry" (p. 51), and seeking "immediate success" (p. 52) are all damaging to one's true self; hence, such actions in the pursuit of true self should be avoided.

4.4   Process of the Transformation to the True Self

The entity of God that should be attained in the search for the true self, according to Merton (1949), is placed in the individual's inner sanctuary. The capacity to enter into that sanctuary depends on the level of achieved perfection and sanctity. The development of those characteristics involves three stages. In the first stage, God's love transforms us; in the second stage, God's love helps us discover ourselves; and in the last stage, God's love governs us to "possess… True identity by losing myself" in God (p. 31). In other words, before the first stage, the true self is hidden within, and only the false self acts; during the first stage, the individual recognises the false orienteers of ego and begins to obey the objectives of the true self more and the false self less. In the second stage, the decline of the false self occurs, and the presence of the true self grows. In the final stage, an individual's inner space is exclusively equipped only with a true self.

I see parallels between those stages and Maxim the Confessor's idea of *theoria physike.* According to the theology of Maxim the Confessor outlined by Merton in his *Lecture Notes on Asceticism and Mysticism*, in the first stage of spiritual development, individuals acquire the stage *apatheia*, described as "serenity" (p. 431) of detachment or "not being the subject to the passions" (p. 431). The "enriched condition" (p. 431) of gnosis, which signifies awareness of the spiritual meaning of things and their relationships, is attained in the second stage by "natural contemplation" (p. 431), or theoria physike. Finally, in the last level of theologia, individuals enter a state of pure "contemplation of God" (p. 431), free of forms and "beyond all conceptions and symbols" (Montaldo, 2003, p. 431). From that explanation, I assume that Merton adopted the description of the true self's evolution from Maxim the Confessor's theology.

4.5 Contemplation

For Merton, contemplation is a "highest expression[…]of mental and spiritual life" (Merton, 1972/2010, p .1), with gratitude and awareness of the reality of God, as a "transcendent and infinitely Source" (Merton, 1972/2010, p. 1). The monastic life, according to Merton, "is above all a life of prayer" (Merton, 2003e, p. 263). As a spiritual expert, Merton describes prayer and contemplation from the practical side in his writings. He defines contemplation as the deep transcendental supernatural activity to find "contact and unity with God" (Merton, 1949. p.13). For that unity, merging of mind and will, spiritual concentration and openness for God are all of primary importance. Contemplation is not granted as a result of an individual's efforts but should be considered as a gift of God and "flight" (Merton, 1949, p. 104) into His "mystery and freedom" (Merton, 1949, p. 104). However, it does not mean that contemplation assumes no actions; in contrast, it is an activity with fruits of invisible nature. For Merton, contemplation is a "highest expression[…]of mental and spiritual life" (Merton, 1972/2010, p .1), with gratitude and awareness of the reality of God, as a "transcendent and infinitely Source" (Merton, 1972/2010, p. 1).

There are also initial conditions for the start of the contemplative activity, as in the true self case. The latest include faith, defined as "a vital contact with God" (Merton, 1949, p. 104), and wholeness, understood as an inner unity. Contemplation profoundly affects the inner life by restoring the true nature and facilitating the escape from the ego's boundaries. It guides to the new "perspectives and perceptions of things" (Merton, 1972/2010, p. 2) and also allows recognising illusions of spiritual life. The contemplative activity contributes to escape from the addiction to the pleasure principle and comparison as an analytical instrument. Several factors are identified as of inmost importance for profound contemplative activity: humility,[2] union with others, perception of the external world not as an absolute reality and spiritual guidance.

Empirically the contemplative practises, including meditation, yoga and prayer, were examined thoroughly, however, mostly with references to Eastern non-Christian traditions. Within the Christian perspective of contemplation, Finney & Maloney produce succinct overview of the literature in manuscript Empirical Studies of Christian Prayer (1985) that includes discussion on contemplative practises and an empirical study of contemplative prayer. Hanley et al. (2015) show the positive effect of contemplation on the development of mindfulness and psychological and subjective well-being, which is empirical evidence for the true self's achievement through contemplation.

4.6 Contemplation as a Way to the True Self

Merton (1949) claims that in contemplation, "we find ourselves and one another as we truly are" (p. 34). That "truly" personality can be "fulfilled in the mystical Christ" (p. 35), and only when being transfigured in God's Love do we "become real" (Merton, 1949, pp. 34–35). For that reason, contemplation contributes to finding the true self, which is an apparent reference to the image of God. Moreover, the false self is incapable of contemplative activity (Merton, 1968/2014), and therefore contemplation facilitates the segment of the false self to decrease and the true self to grow.

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[2] The primary requirement for spiritual life according to Eastern Christian Fathers.

4.7   True Self and Theosis

In accordance with Merton (1966), the true self is a point that "belongs entirely to God" (p. 158), "from which God disposes of our lives" (p. 158); True self is "the pure glory of God in us" (p. 158) and "[God's] name written in us" (p. 158). From that is clear that in terms of definition, the true self is similar to the theosis concept. On the other hand, Merton claims that "to be a saint means to be myself […] Therefore, the problem of sanctity and salvation, in fact, the problem […] of discovering my true self" (Merton., 1949, p. 10). It follows that the true self is equal to sanctity, while the theosis as God's likeness includes sanctity. Consequently, I conclude that the true self is rightly located in a precondition for theosis. Demonstration of their similarity, however, is another research subject; thus, I can suggest a future, more in-depth examination of this relationship.

4.8   Relevance of the True Self for the Modern People

Indeed, the habit of modern humans of continual prayer and meditation on God may look utopian, as Merton also noticed. However, the Hesychasm and associated doctrines, in my opinion, provide significant advantages for modern humanity, and at least one previous study in that field was conducted (Naumescu, 2012). For example, the spiritual struggle approach, which incorporates profound inner attention, thought selectivity, and emotional control has clear allusions to the popular contemporary practices of mindfulness and inner concertation. The institution of spiritual fatherhood has other benefits. For example, an atmosphere of total trust and disclosure of ideas developed between Spiritual Father and adept might serve as an appropriate model for family members and friends seeking a deeper connection.

4.9   Conclusions

In sum, Merton identifies the ultimate meaning in life as a search for the true self and contemplation as a practice for that achievement. Merton shows the true self as a perfected structure of every individual hidden in the core of being with an apparent reference to theosis. To achieve the true self, essential to pass through several stages of self-improvement, including transformation, recognition and identification with the ultimate source of being. Merton suggests several influential factors for reaching the true self, including contemplative prayer. On the one hand, Merton uncovers the depth of Christian mysticism, particularly the concept of theosis, for the general reader. On the other hand, Merton's work becomes the next stage in a spiritual and psychological exploration of the everlasting issue of ST related to human identity and the search for meaning in life (Haynes, 2016). His theory divides the self into ' true ' and ' false' to develop a system of analysis that spans the academic border between psychology and spirituality. The connection of psychological and spiritual knowledge is designed to aid in the creation of new understandings and approaches to human progress, and potential discovery and Merton's approach to merging spirituality and psychology begins with self-identity (Haynes, 2016).

5 MIL in Positive Psychology

5.1 Introduction

Positive psychology places a greater emphasis on an individual's inner and spiritual growth. It also focuses on specific strategies for organising life in terms of attitude and purpose. Positive psychology has many common aims with already analysed religious theories but looks at human development as a whole rather than as part of a specific worldview. As a science, positive psychology is predominantly based on empirical research that has been carried out for the past thirty years. As a primary theoretical foundation for the third approach, I will consider the newest publications of Tatjana Schnell's (2020), *The psychology of meaning in life*, in which she examines the diverse approaches to meaning in life. I will also refer to the classical Viktor Frankl's writing *Man's Search for Meanin*g and several related texts. Firstly, I will define the MIL as a phenomenon, secondly explain the role of sources of meaning in that theory and finally illustrate the hierarchic model of meaning with demonstrating the significance of MIL.

5.2 Meaning in Life (MIL)

According to Frankl's logotherapy finding meaning in life (MIL) is a primary objective of humans. The search for meaning frequently begins after a period of meaninglessness or an "existential vacuum" (Frankl, 1965). Our experiences and behaviours are based on meanings. We derive meaning from various sources to make sense of our existence. For example, life becomes significant when one has a sense of purpose that makes life worthwhile (Frankl, 1970). Furthermore, for an individual's effective development, a strong foundation of a sense of purpose is required (Frankl, 1985). The presence of MIL is linked to one's health and happiness (for example, Jung claims that a lack of meaning can lead to psychopathology). It is noteworthy that man's search for meaning is recognised as his life's primary motivation (Frankl, 1970).

Similarly to Frankl, Schnell (2020) defines MIL through categories of meaningfulness and crisis of meaning. Meaningfulness means evaluating life as coherent, significant, oriented and belonging. Coherence is assumed life as an organised and coherent system of actions, goals and values. Significance means the perception of our activity as recognisable. Orientation confirms the presence in the life of the particular goals, accompanied by moving towards these goals. Belonging understands as a perception of oneself as a part of a larger whole. Four given factors indicate the presence of MIL. The individual presence of MIL differentiates with references to its sources. The crisis of meaning is described as evaluating one's life as useless and without meaning. Usually, it is followed by disorientation and disintegration of the personal opinion on self and worldview. The lack of meaningfulness and crisis of meaning named existential indifference has become a significant issue nowadays (Schnell, 2020).

5.3 Sources of Meaning

The meaning of life varies for different people and at different times. Therefore, the specific meaning of an individual's life at a given moment is essential (Frankl, 1970).

Because life is a series of unique situations, the meaning of life is a series of different unique meanings (Frankl, 1970). Sources of meaning present different orientations that nourish life with meaning; it creates a particular form for meaning, so-called" meaning in action" (Leontiev, as cited in Schnell, 2020). Schnell (2020) defines 26 sources of meaning divided into five categories: ST (vertical and horizontal) - 10 sources; self-actualisation – 4 sources; order – 5 sources; well-being and relatedness -7 sources. The category of ST is most widely represented and includes the following categories:

- vertical ST (faith and religion, belief in other reality, strive for fairness and justice for all);
- horizontal ST (close friendly relation to the environment, healthy lifestyle, self-knowledge and self-recognition, intention to share one's experience and knowledge with others, spontaneity and curiosity, search for new awareness of self-opinion and distinction from ideas of others).

Eight of ten sources of meaning that belong to the ST category are highly correlated with factors identified as important within the theory of theosis and Merton's true self. Other categories, such as balance with oneself and others, taking care and helping others, awareness and application of practical and valuable activities in life, striving for a deeper world and self-understanding, following good morals and unity with others, also contain many connections to analysed religious theories. As a result, more than half of 26 sources of meaning are highly correlated with the religious approach to theosis and true self. In other sources, diverse aspects such as orientation on goal achievement, following traditions, rational thinking, romantic relationship and intimacy, fun, cheerfulness, pleasure and relaxation are represented. In sum, in the description of sources of meaning, the sources traditional for religious and non-religious worldviews are represented approximately in equal proportion (Schnell, 2020).

5.4 Hierarchic Model of Meaning

In the hierarchic model of meaning, Schnell (2020) defines five levels: perceptions, actions, goals, sources of meaning and MIL (MIL has three degrees: meaningfulness, the crisis of meaning and existential indifference). That scheme is assumed as a specific strategy for managing MIL. To obtain MIL at the top of the hierarchy, acting meaningfully at all stages is crucial. Meaningful perception means focusing on something that requires actions. Actions are meaningful when they follow the defined goals. Goals are regarded as meaningful[3] when they are intrinsic and oriented for the future, e.g. consistent with sources of meaning, sources of meaning are recognised as meaningful when an individual has the overall evaluation of the degree of meaning in life as meaningfulness. Only at that point do all of the described systems become complete. As a result, the presented theory provides a meaning-organising algorithm that should be coherent both vertically (on different levels) and horizontally (on one level) (Schnell, 2020).

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[3] Goals also could be meaningless in the case of their extrinsic orientation (Schnell, 2020).

5.5 Significance of MIL

According to Frankl (1985), meaning performs various vital functions in our lives. At first, it gives us a feeling of direction in our life. Second, it leads to values that enable us to assess our actions. Third, we get some control over the events in our lives due to meaning. Finally, meaning gives us a sense of self-esteem (Frankl, 1985).

5.6 Conclusions

Hence, following positive psychology to find meaning in life (MIL) is a primary aim of humans (Frankl, 1985). Our experiences and behaviours are based on meanings. We derive meaning from various sources to make sense of our existence (Frankl, 1966). The meaning of life varies for different people and different moments of life. Schnell (2020) defines a specific strategy in finding MIL through coherence of perception, actions, goals and values and identifies 26 sources of meaning with the biggest number of ST sources (10), which justify its further empirical exploration and use for comparison. Positive psychology considers ST as an indicator of an individual's inner and spiritual growth.

6 Comparison of Spiritual and Psychological Approaches to ST

6.1 Common Studies

Nelson and Slife (Nelson and Slife 2017) provide a rare example of comparing early Christian teachings (on which theosis is primarily based) with positive psychology. The authors discover common points in both approaches, first in the similar goal of discovering the full human potential; secondly, in the development of earlier anthropology of patristic writers in response to the classic Greek philosophy of that time, which closely mirrors the current approach in positive psychology. Furthermore, they confirm the earlier patristic writer's foundational importance for all Christianity, as well as their wider acceptance by both East and West (Nelson & Slife, 2017).

Despite their similarities, there are some differences in those approaches: in the understanding of suffering, the individualistic character of virtues in positive psychology and the neglection of ST in the hedonistic model of MIL (Nelson & Slife, 2017). That claim, however, is debatable. The analysed works of Frankl and Schnell demonstrate the transcendental values above individual preferences. Individual flourishing is necessary for the positive psychology approach, but it is not the end goal. Positive psychology's approach to human flourishing is separated into two types: hedonism, which is based on material content and the pleasure principle, and eudemonic, which is based on spiritual content and the development of virtues. Earlier Christian writers opposed hedonistic means to realising one's full potential. According to them, a practical approach to theosis necessitates a combination of physical, psychological, and spiritual discipline (that contains the ascetic lifestyle with religious activity, both collective and individual). Every individual and their level of spiritual development determines the exact level of discipline, spiritual and religious dedication. This way of living also contributes to the development of the virtues and various advantages resulting from ascetic living (Nelson & Slife, 2017).

6.2 Meaning-Making and Theosis

The process of meaning-making is central to MIL theory, and it connects again to theosis. The ability to create meaning and, as a result, the ability to change the nature of things or create new ones through the power of imagination may be evidence of humanity's capacity for deification. Understanding how humans make sense of situations (what is) and events (what happens) requires knowledge of how "meaning is formed," or how a certain meaning is extracted from the flow of information, as well as how a particular narrative in our mind occurs (Taves et al., 2018). Moreover, changes available in theosis also require a profound revision of thinking, as explained in the theory of MIL.

6.3 Suggestions for the Future Research

There is no clear understanding of what ST represents from a spiritual or psychological perspective. Three types of gaps are identified in the current field of research. The various authors report on insufficient research of ST in general and some particular geographical locations (e.g., outside the US and EU), social groups (e.g., in experts of Christian contemplative practices) and specific research focus (e.g., a study of sacraments or different religious activity inside the particular group) (Hardy et al., 2019). Furthermore, several studies show a lack of understanding of the phenomena of ST, controversies and conflicting theories in comparing religious and non-religious approaches to ST (Nelson & Slife, 2017), different explanations (causes, effects, nature) of ST. Finally, the methodological gaps have been recognised in the limitations of quantitative methods (Hardy et al., 2019).

Also, those three analysed approaches can be studied on the examples of the three particular personalities. That allows us to examine the practical influences of analysed ways to ST in real life. First is already mentioned, Thomas Merton. The other religious personality from Orthodox background comparable with Merton could be Sophrony Sakharov. He also lived in the same period and approached theosis and Hesychasm, first living in Mount Athos and then in England. The third personality for the study is Victor Frankl, who also lived in the same span and approached ST from the point of meaning in life. Another suggestion for future research is to compare transhumanism as a technological way to ST with the concept of theosis. More emphasis should be put on analyses of theosis adaptation in modernity through the lens of Merton's example.

7 Conclusions

In sum, theosis as a patristic concept understands ST as obtaining God's likeness through certain lifestyles and religious practices. Merton uses the concept of ST to address many of the spiritual, psychological and social issues that occur as a result of binary thinking. Positive psychology provides a clear plan for organising life as a series of interconnected activities and goals to find meaning in one's existence based on ST's sources. However, positive psychology provides no orientation in choosing specific sources of meaning, making it heavily dependent on an individual's level of psychological maturity. Also, approaching existential psychology without profound internal changes in values gives

only an external effect. Thus, the theory of MIL may be beneficial from a Christian perspective; however, it is not anchored to the primary element of incarnated God Jesus Christ in the centre. For that reason, the system of knowledge built-in positive psychology is similar to religion but remains incomplete. There's are voices in the scientific community that the next era after postmodernism might be a significant shift back to the values typical of Neoplatonism (Panasyuk, 2018). Maybe the ST so actively defended by Christianity and positive psychology is a natural coherent, and evolutional development of human thinking?

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