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*As a manuscript*

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**THE DYNAMICS OF MEANING IN  
THE EXPERIENCE OF  
PERSONAL SPIRITUAL CRISIS**

PhD Dissertation Summary

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## Introduction

**Relevance.** Contemporary research on religiosity and spirituality has accumulated a substantial body of both theoretical and empirical work and continues to develop actively. By 2021, author-defined conceptualizations of spirituality in psychology and health care had already appeared in 166 peer-reviewed articles (Brito Sena de et al., 2021). In the Russian academic discourse, the past two decades have witnessed the publication of numerous profound methodological studies dedicated to analyzing spirituality and spiritual phenomena in psychology (Vasilyuk, 2005/2021; Leontiev, 2005; Zinchenko, 2007, 2010; Serkin, 2007; Bratus, 2014a, 2014b, 2019; Ozhiganova, 2020; Shadrikov, 2020, 2021).

The scholarly focus on spirituality in psychology may be attributed to the series of global crises humanity has faced in recent decades. Profound societal transformations—challenging the spiritual and moral foundations of human existence—have been mirrored in academic psychology’s growing interest in the phenomenon of spiritual crisis. Over the past 40 years, the conceptual vocabulary in this domain has significantly expanded, with researchers introducing such constructs as «spiritual emergency» (Grof & Grof, 1989, 2017), «spiritual dryness» (Büssing et al., 2013), «spiritual struggle» (Exline, 2013), and «spiritual suffering» (Bartel, 2004), among others.

Two major trends can be discerned in current research. First, numerous studies investigate the associations between spiritual crisis and various indicators of subjective well-being and health (Corneille & Luke, 2021; Cowden et al., 2022; Fisher, 2011; Upenieks, 2022). Second, another strand of research focuses on identifying the substantive markers and antecedents of these phenomena through qualitative inquiry (Harris et al., 2020; Tabik et al., 2020; van Nieuw Amerongen et al., 2023).

Against this backdrop, researchers are increasingly directing attention toward the positive role of spiritual meaning-making in coping with adverse life circumstances (Ahmadi et al., 2019; Nkoana et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Indeed, periods of global uncertainty naturally elicit renewed interest in religion and

spirituality, as such contexts activate individuals' fundamental needs for existential grounding and meaning in life<sup>1</sup>. It is therefore unsurprising that the majority of scholars addressing spirituality and transcendent experiences consistently foreground the concept of meaning (Znakov, 1998; Leontiev, 2005; Bratus, 1988; Verezei, 2024; Wong, 1998).

Building upon these theoretical syntheses, we argue that the experience of spiritual crisis is most fruitfully examined within the framework of personal meaning dynamics.

### **Research Problem**

Meaning is frequently conceptualized in conjunction with the spiritual dimension (Frankl, 1990), metaphorically described as a bridge to the transcendent (Leontiev, 1999/2019; Wong, 2016). Ontologically, meaning—while linked to human cognition—is understood as transcending the subject (Bakhtin, 1986) and belonging to a mode of being through which meaning reveals itself to consciousness (Sartre, 1972/2001). Moreover, when realized at the highest levels of the hierarchical structure of the psyche, the sphere of meaning is regarded as being defined by spirituality—an ontological mode of human existence (Bratus, Voeykov, & Vorobyev, 1995) and a distinct form of personality regulation (Leontiev, 2005).

However, examining meaning dynamics in the context of spiritual crisis reveals a paradox: the very precondition for transitioning into spiritual being appears to be the impossibility of further meaning-making. As Vasilyuk (2021) observes, authentic prayer naturally arises precisely within the crisis of experience—when hope is lost and the individual's internal efforts to make sense of a critical situation have reached an impasse.

We propose that this paradox is resolved through the individual's voluntary acceptance of a challenge addressed directly to the self—one that threatens the integrity of their meaning system. Spiritual transcendence in crisis emerges as a «possibility of the impossible» (Vasilyuk, 2021) and becomes actualized only when

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<sup>1</sup> URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/feature/religious-composition-by-country-2010-2050/> (Retrieved: 20.07.2025)

the person willingly embraces the meaning of another mode of being, a process that necessarily entails the dismantling of their former «worldview shell» (Jaspers & Golikov, 2021).

Meanings originating from being—though not yet accessible to the individual—serve as a connecting thread between past and future modes of existence, between current and potential forms of regulation: «Where your meanings are, there your soul is also» (Vasilyuk, 2021, p. 25). The transition to a new regulatory mode may manifest as a spiritual crisis, which in turn becomes the condition for the formation of unique meaning structures. These structures, reflecting the psychological essence of spirituality, transcend conventional semantic frameworks and reside in what Znakov (1998, p. 107) terms the «deep meaning of human actions».

In existential psychology, such deep meaning is understood as a life design or global significance of events—something not immediately evident within the individual's own logic but potentially revealed and assimilated through dialogical engagement (Frankl, 1990; Yalom, 2014). Later, the concept of «spiritual meaning» was introduced to denote the intuitive experience of one's vocation and its connection to the transcendent (Mascaro, Rosen, & Morey, 2004), classified by its authors as a type of global meaning.

Global meanings have been studied in relation to well-being and recovery from trauma (Park & Gutierrez, 2013; Park, 2017). Concepts such as «ultimate meaning» and models of self-transcendence—where the search for ultimate meaning constitutes a core dimension—have also been developed (Wong, 1998, 2014, 2016). Nevertheless, this research area currently exhibits conceptual fragmentation and a lack of methodological consensus, a concern actively debated at the First International Congress on the Construction of Personal Meaning<sup>2</sup>.

Reflecting on the congress discussions, Park (2017) concluded that meaning dynamics must be investigated specifically within extraordinary, difficult life

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<sup>2</sup> First International Congress on the Construction of Personal Meaning. URL: <https://istina.msu.ru/conferences/7887378/> (Retrieved: 20.07.2025)

circumstances that compel individuals to restructure their meaning systems and reconcile discrepancies between global and situational meanings. Similar views were articulated as early as 1993 by Bratus, who advocated for an eschatological paradigm in psychology—one grounded in «ultimate, final meanings of human existence» (Bratus, 1993). Bratus emphasized that the «real process of incarnation» is accompanied by existential drama and is achieved precisely through difficult, often tragic, circumstances. Such nonlinear personal development—marked by falls and ascents—becomes possible, we suggest, because «difficult or critical life situations generate the necessity for specific forms of self-regulation» (Leontiev, 2025, p. 10).

In this light, it is heuristically valuable to draw upon Leontiev's (2005, 2019) conceptualization of spirituality as the highest level of self-regulation, characteristic of a mature personality. We posit that spirituality represents a supreme regulatory level wherein the subject transcends their immediate lifeworld and interpersonal relations through acts of spiritual meaning-making. This transition to a higher regulatory plane during spiritual crisis is both reflected in and enacted through the dynamics of personal meaning.

**Object** of the study: the dynamics of personal meaning.

**Subject** of the study: the dynamics of personal meaning under conditions of spiritual crisis.

**Purpose** of the current study: to describe the dynamics of personal meaning during the experience of spiritual crisis and to identify the specific relationships between different forms of meaning and indicators of religiosity and spiritual well-being.

Within the framework of this goal, we have set the following **objectives**:

*Theoretical objectives:*

1. On the basis of existing theoretical and methodological frameworks, define the psychological content of spirituality and analyze prospects for its study in psychology.

2. Drawing on the cultural-historical approach, formulate and justify a working definition of spiritual crisis as an extreme contradiction between an individual's meaning system and higher sign-symbolic forms of the sacred, resulting in the disintegration of conscious integrity.

3. Systematize conceptualizations of meaning within the psychological domain. Develop and justify a working definition of spiritual meaning as a distinct type of meaning that transcends the immediate lifeworld of the individual and integrates their personal coherence through alignment with ultimate (sacralized) values.

*Empirical objectives:*

4. Based on qualitative data, construct a model of meaning dynamics during the experience of a spiritual crisis and identify psychological mechanisms underlying shifts in personality regulation linked to the emergence of spiritual meaning orientation.

5. Examine the relationships between spiritual meaning indicators and measures of spiritual well-being, dimensions of meaning (purpose, coherence, significance), and religious variables (religious coping, religious commitment, centrality of religiosity), as moderated by prior experience of spiritual crisis.

6. Investigate the specificity of associations between meaning-related variables and indicators of positive functioning (spiritual well-being, happiness).

7. Identify meaning-based predictors of positive personality functioning during the experience of spiritual crisis.

8. Explore the unique interplay between spiritual meaning indicators and religious parameters.

9. Formulate universal psychological functions of spiritual meaning in relation to the period of spiritual crisis and personal well-being.

**General hypothesis** of the study: spiritual meaning facilitates overcoming a spiritual crisis and ensures positive functioning of the individual throughout its course.

**Hypotheses** of the study:

1. The resolution of subjectively experienced spiritual crisis is accompanied by the discovery of meaning connected to a higher (sacred) value.
2. The associations between spiritual meaning indicators and measures of well-being, meaning dimensions (purpose, coherence, significance), and religious variables (religious coping, religious commitment, centrality of religiosity) are moderated by the experience of spiritual crisis.
3. Spiritual meaning indicators predict positive psychological outcomes (happiness, spiritual well-being), particularly during active spiritual crisis.
4. Among religious individuals, spiritual meaning mediates the relationship between religious value-meaning orientations and the depth of religious faith.

**The methodological foundations of the study** are: Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory—particularly his ideas on the genesis of higher mental functions and the meaningful structure of consciousness—as further developed in: Bratus's theory of hierarchical personality regulation, Leontiev's work on the dynamics of meaning structures and spiritual regulation, Zinchenko's conception of meaning as a mediating function, and Vasilyuk's model of spiritual coping with critical life situations.

**Research Methods:** The study employed a mixed-methods design, combining theoretical analysis of existing approaches to spirituality within a unified methodological framework, in-depth interviewing, and survey-based assessment.

The study used a **battery of psychodiagnostic tools:**

1. *Spiritual Meaning Scale (SMS)* by N. Mascaro, adapted by Yu.S. Vitko, A.A. Zolotareva, A.A. Lebedeva, and M. Lynch, measuring two related indicators of spiritual meaning — coherence and calling (Mascaro, Rosen, Morey, 2004; Vitko et al., 2022).
2. *Three Dimensional Meaning in Life Scale (3DM)* by F. Martela and M. Steger, adapted by D.S. Korshunov and E.N. Osin, allowing to assess meaning in three aspects — coherence, purpose, and significance (Martela, Steger, 2023; Korshunov, Osin, in press).

3. *Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)* by S. Lyubomirsky, adapted by E.N. Osin and D.A. Leontiev, allowing for a rapid assessment of the subjective level of happiness by the respondent (Lyubomirsky, Lepper, 1999; Osin, Leontiev, 2008; Osin, Leontiev, 2020).
4. *Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS)* by R. Paloutzian and C. Ellison, adapted by O.A. Kolupaeva and co-authors, which evaluates two dimensions of well-being — existential and religious (Paloutzian, Ellison, 1982; Kolupaeva et al., in press).
5. *Posttraumatic Growth and Depreciation Inventory (PTGDI-X-SF)* developed by R. Tedeschi and colleagues, adapted by N.V. Efremova and co-authors, and assessing five parameters of posttraumatic changes along axes of enhancement and impairment (Tedeschi et al., 2017; Efremova et al., in press).
6. *Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10)* developed by E. Worthington and adapted by A.M. Dvoynin and co-authors, allowing to assess the degree to which an individual adheres to religious values, beliefs, and practices (Worthington et al., 2003; Dvoynin et al., 2023).
7. *Brief Religious Coping Measure (B-RCOPE)* by K. Pargament and colleagues, adapted by F.M. Shankov and co-authors, allowing to assess two coping strategies in the religious aspect — positive and negative (Pargament, Feuille, Burdzy, 2011; Shankov et al., 2022).
8. *Scale of Religious Value-Meaning Orientation (RCSO)* authored by A.M. Dvoynin, representing a modification of the «Personality Value-Meaning Orientations-8» (PVS-8) technique by G.E. Leevik, and assessing the significance for an individual of various aspects of religious experience (Leevik, 1990; Dvoynin, 2007).
9. *Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS)* by S. Huber, adapted to Russian by M. Ackert, E.V. Prutskova, and I.V. Zabaev, and measuring the significance of several dimensions of religiosity in an individual's life (Huber, 2018; Ackert, Prutskova, Zabaev, 2020).

**The empirical base** of the study is a series of surveys and research conducted in 2021-2025. *The qualitative study* involved 31 people aged 19 to 52 years who have experienced an ongoing or overcome spiritual crisis. *The quantitative study* involved 1,457 people aged 18 to 79 years who report experiencing an ongoing spiritual crisis.

**Scientific novelty** of the study: For the first time within the cultural-activity paradigm, a theoretical justification of the concept of spiritual crisis has been developed, a working definition proposed, and an empirical model of its subjective experience constructed. For the first time, theoretical propositions have been empirically substantiated—namely, that spiritual meaning arises within spiritual crisis, replacing a collapsed prior meaning system and restructuring personal meaning dynamics toward a higher (sacred) value. For the first time, empirical data revealed the key contribution of the sense of calling to overcoming spiritual crisis at the level of the individual's meaning system, as well as demonstrated the essential role of perceived meaningfulness in maintaining spiritual well-being during active spiritual crisis. Moreover, for the first time, the specificity of relationships between meaning parameters and religiosity indicators was clarified among individuals with varying experiences of spiritual crisis.

**Theoretical Significance** of the study: The category of spiritual crisis has been examined at the theoretical level from the perspective of the cultural-activity approach, opening new avenues for its application in future research. The construct of spiritual meaning has been theoretically substantiated in light of psychological models of meaning structures and their dynamics. The model of meaning dynamics during the experience of a spiritual crisis, derived from qualitative empirical data, reflects theoretical views of crisis experience as internal meaning-making work aimed at reconstructing a new integrated meaning system through the discovery of deep meaning tied to a higher (sacred) value.

**Practical Significance** of the study: The findings can be applied in the practice of counseling psychologists working with clients presenting spiritual concerns, regardless of whether they identify with a specific religious

denomination or do not adhere to any religion. The results may serve as a foundation for developing psychotechnical methods to support individuals in crisis states recognized as having spiritual content. The study may also be useful to parish psychologists and clergy engaged in pastoral care for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying spiritual life.

**Reliability and Validity** of the study: The reliability and validity of the study's results are ensured by a coherent theoretical and methodological framework, a large sample size, a mixed qualitative-quantitative research design, and the appropriate application of statistical methods for analyzing quantitative data.

#### **Theses Submitted for Defense:**

1. The experience of spiritual crisis, at the level of personal meaning dynamics, manifests as the disintegration of meaning integrity and the deconstruction of rigid meaning structures.
2. The collapse of prior meaning integrity during spiritual crisis is a necessary condition for the emergence of spiritual meaning.
3. The reconstruction of meaning integrity during spiritual crisis occurs through orientation toward a higher (sacred) value.
4. Spiritual meaning—particularly awareness of one's calling—predicts positive personality functioning by enhancing perceived coherence of the world.
5. Perceived meaningfulness of life predicts spiritual well-being specifically during active spiritual crisis.

#### **Research Validation**

The materials of the dissertation were discussed at postgraduate seminars of the Department of Psychology at HSE University. The main results of the dissertation project were presented at Russian conferences:

1. All-Russian (with international participation) scientific and practical conference «Social and psychological resources for personal development» (2025, Sevastopol).

2. XXXII International Christmas Educational Readings «Church care for mentally ill people: emotional disorders in the practice of pastor, psychiatrist, and psychologist» (2024, Moscow).

3. All-Russian (with international participation) scientific and practical conference «Social and psychological resources of personality in situations of life crises» (2024, Sevastopol).

4. XIII International scientific and practical conference «Personality in extreme conditions and crisis situations of life activity» (2024, Vladivostok).

5. V International conference «Church care for the mentally ill: a modern view of religious experiences in norm and pathology. Church and psychiatry: facets of cooperation» (2023, Moscow).

**The dissertation structure** includes an introduction, three main chapters, conclusions, a final discussion, a reference list, and 13 appendices. The reference list includes 367 sources, of which 195 are in foreign languages (primarily English and German). The main body of the dissertation spans 208 pages and presents the research findings in six tables and seven figures.

### **Main Content of the Dissertation**

**Chapter One** of the dissertation research is devoted to examining the main approaches to the study of spirituality in psychology, as well as discussing the challenges and prospects of studying spiritual phenomena in personality psychology.

**Section 1.1** is dedicated to reviewing the historical context of the development of ideas about spirituality in psychology. The legacy of 20th-century foreign psychology has contributed to the formation of an existential-humanistic view of a person with a basic (assumed or possible) striving towards the realization of higher manifestations beyond egocentric motives (C. Jung, A. Maslow, E. Fromm, V. Frankl). A separate historical line of development of the phenomenon of spirituality involved its separation from the concept of religiosity, which was associated with accumulating contradictions in empirical research and secularization processes at the societal level. Based on K. Pargament's views (Zinnbauer, Pargament, 2005), we tend to consider religiosity as a broader concept compared to spirituality. Thus,

spirituality is proposed to be understood in a broad aspect of an individual's relationship with what is recognized by them as transcendent or sacred. At the same time, following the author, we understand religiosity as an appeal to religious beliefs and practices, which can be carried out by a person both in the form of instrumental realization of spiritual life in their striving for the sacred, and in connection with other motives.

**Section 2.2** focuses on the analysis of the dynamics of personal meaning. Drawing upon Russian psychological conceptualizations of the phenomenon of meaning (Vygotsky, 1934; Morozov, 1984; Leontiev, 2003), we conceptualize spiritual meaning as a psychological construct that reflects the significance of an object or event within an individual's system of life relations and fulfills a regulatory function. Particular attention is given to theoretical accounts of the hierarchical organization of meaning systems, wherein the highest level is associated with spirituality (Bratus, 1995). The functioning of such hierarchical meaning systems is examined within the framework of «micro-» and «macro-dynamics» of meaning structures (Asmolov, Bratus, Zeigarnik et al., 1979; Leontiev, 2019). Micro-dynamics involve transformations within meaning structures themselves and their systemic interrelations—processes such as meaning-generation, meaning-awareness, and meaning-construction. Macro-dynamics, by contrast, occur when the very principles governing the organization and functioning of the dynamic meaning system undergo fundamental change (see Leontiev, 2019). We propose that such a shift in organizational principles takes place when an individual transitions to a spiritual level of self-regulation, mediated by spiritual meaning operating at the level of higher-order meaning-generating structures.

**Section 2.3** presents an analysis of the psychological characteristics of «higher» manifestations of meaning. Hierarchical models of meaning systems have been further developed in several theoretical frameworks, including Schnell's (2009, 2011) model of transcendent sources of meaning, Park and Folkman's (1997; Park, 2017) two-level model distinguishing global and situational meanings, Wong's (1998, 2014, 2016) concept of «ultimate meaning» rooted in existential psychology

and inspired by Viktor Frankl's ideas, and Mascaro, Rosen, and Morey's (2004) elaboration of the construct of spiritual meaning. Scholars have also emphasized religious meaning systems as significant factors capable of shaping self-regulation by reorienting individuals' value frameworks (Zell & Baumeister, 2013). In the present work, we consider it essential to examine spiritual meaning as a construct distinct from religious specificity. We argue that spiritual meaning facilitates the integration («weaving-in») of higher values into the personality structure, thereby enabling their active participation in processes of personal self-regulation.

**Section 2.4** analyzes the experience of spiritual crisis from the perspective of meaning dynamics. The emergence of spiritual meaning is predicated upon the disintegration of a prior meaning system organized around a non-optimal, non-spiritual understanding of life's purpose (see Karpinsky, 2017), which occurs during the experience of a spiritual crisis. We define spiritual crisis as a contradiction between an individual's existing meaning system and what the person perceives as sacred or transcendent with regard to their life as a whole. This crisis represents a disruption in the dynamics of meaning-based regulation, arising from a conflict between two value-meaning centers: one anchored in the individual's former life-world and the other oriented toward a prospective, not-yet-assimilated domain that embodies a higher (sacred) value.

**Section 2.5** addresses the role of spiritual meaning in the experience of spiritual crisis. The crisis unfolds as a process of positive disintegration (Dąbrowski, 1964), characterized simultaneously by (a) the individual's movement toward a higher (sacred) value and the reorganization of personality structures around a new—spiritual—meaning, and (b) the dissolution of elements belonging to the previous meaning structure. In this study, we define spiritual meaning as a *distinct form of meaning that transcends the individual's current life-world and organizes personal integrity from the perspective of a higher (sacred) value*. Building on the theoretical insights of Vygotsky and Leontiev, we posit that the formation of spiritual meanings presupposes the attribution of a signifying (semiotic) function to higher values, which subsequently enables the imbuing of objects and situations with

spiritual meaning. Operating at the level of «core» personality structures, spiritual meaning regulates the entire meaning system and human activity as a whole according to a logic of transcendence.

**Chapter 3** presents two empirical studies—a qualitative and a quantitative investigation. For each study, we provide a description of the sample, methodology, data collection and analysis procedures, results, and discussion. The qualitative study aimed to explore the functional role of spiritual meaning in the experience of spiritual crisis and was designed to test Hypothesis 1. The quantitative study investigated spiritual meaning as a regulatory resource of personality and was conducted to test Hypotheses 2–4.

**Section 3.1** reports the findings of the qualitative study. A longitudinal design was employed, comprising two data collection waves separated by a two-year interval. The first wave was conducted in 2020–2021, and the second in 2022–2023. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews (Busygina, 2025). Thematic analysis followed the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2001). The final sample consisted of 18 participants (14 women and 4 men) aged 21 to 54 years ( $M = 29.2$ ;  $SD = 12.2$ ), including Orthodox Christians, a Protestant, a Buddhist, an adherent of the Integral Theory (ITist), individuals unaffiliated with any religious tradition, and atheists. The interview guide was organized into three thematic blocks: (1) the content and dynamics of the experienced spiritual crisis; (2) changes resulting from the crisis; and (3) the role of having overcome the spiritual crisis in participants' subsequent lives and in later critical situations.

Based on the qualitative analysis, we constructed a model of meaning dynamics during the experience of spiritual crisis (see Figures 1–2).

Within the framework of the developed model, we identified 5 stages of spiritual crisis experience: 1) destruction of the previous meaning system; 2) discovery of spiritual meaning that has sacred significance for the individual; 3) struggle for establishing a new meaning hierarchy; 4) acquisition and incorporation of spiritual meaning into the meaning system; 5) spiritual meaning as the «engine» of spiritual regulation.

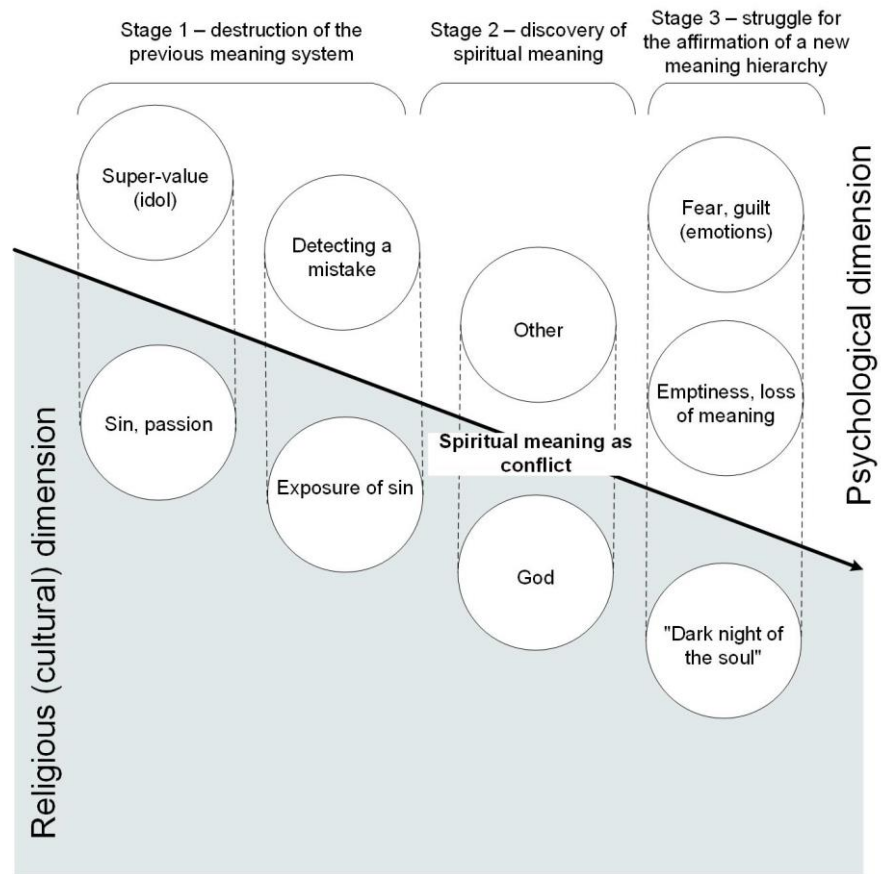


Figure 1. A model of meaning dynamics during the experience of a spiritual crisis (stages 1–3)

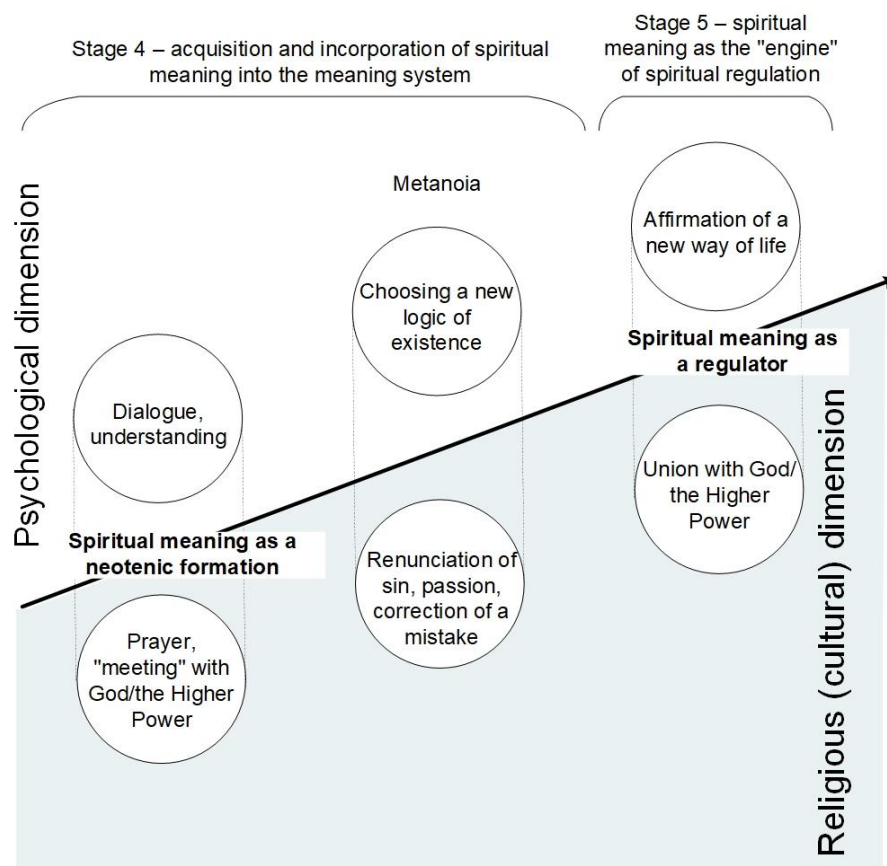


Figure 2. A model of meaning dynamics during the experience of a spiritual crisis (stages 4,5)

According to the results of the qualitative research, we formulated a functional definition of spiritual meaning, which is understood as a psychological phenomenon organizing the integrity of the personality in its connection with the transcendent (as a mediator), appearing as a result of overcoming a spiritual crisis situation and subsequently becoming an instrument for constructing (as a generator) and functioning (as a regulator) of spiritual regulation of the personality.

Spiritual meaning is acquired by the personality according to the laws of development of higher mental functions and manifests itself in three planes: first — social, then — individual, and finally — transcendent, acting as an instrument of spiritual regulation of the personality.

**Paragraph 3.2** describes the results of the quantitative study. The final sample of the study included 1,457 people (1,212 women and 245 men) aged 18 to 79 years ( $M=41.27$ ;  $SD=12.35$ ), among whom there were respondents who identified themselves as Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, those who

did not identify with any religious confession, atheists, and those who marked «other».

**Subparagraph 3.2.1** describes the methods and procedure of the study. Data collection was carried out using a survey on the online platform hse.lka.si. Socio-demographic data included: gender, age, and religion. Respondents were also asked if they had ever experienced a spiritual crisis with a binary response («yes/no»). The battery of psychological methods was divided into three blocks: 1) a general block for all respondents; 2) a block for respondents affiliated with religion; 3) a block for respondents who had overcome a spiritual crisis.

Methods of the general block: 1) The *Spiritual Meaning Scale (SMS)* by N. Mascaro, adapted by Yu.S. Vitko, A.A. Zolotareva, A.A. Lebedeva, and M. Lynch (Mascaro, Rosen, Morey, 2004; Vitko et al., 2022); 2) *The Three Dimensional Meaning in Life Scale (3DM)* by F. Martela and M. Steger, adapted by D.S. Korshunov and E.N. Osin (Martela, Steger, 2023; Korshunov, Osin, in press); 3) *The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)* by S. Lyubomirsky (Lyubomirsky, Lepper, 1999; Osin, Leontiev, 2008, 2020), allowing for a quick assessment of the respondent's subjective level of happiness; 4) *The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS)* by R. Paloutzian and C. Ellison, adapted by O.A. Kolupaeva and colleagues (Paloutzian, Ellison, 1982; Kolupaeva, Lebedeva, Vitko, in press).

Methods for respondents affiliated with religion: 1) *The Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10)* developed by E. Worthington and adapted by A.M. Dvojnin and colleagues, which allows assessing the degree to which a person adheres to religious values, beliefs, and practices (Worthington et al., 2003; Dvojnin et al., 2023); 2) *The Brief Religious Coping Measure (B-RCOPE)* by K. Pargament and colleagues, adapted by F.M. Shan'kov and colleagues (Pargament, Feuille, Burdzy, 2011; Shan'kov et al., 2022); 3) *The Religious Value-Meaning Orientation (RVSO)* authored by A.M. Dvojnin, which is a modification of the «Personality Value-Meaning Orientations-8» (PVM-8) methodology by G.E. Leevik and assesses the significance for a person of various aspects of religious experience (Leevik, 1990; Dvojnin, 2007); 4) *The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS)* by S. Huber,

adapted to Russian by M. Ackert, E.V. Prutskova, and I.V. Zabaev (Huber, 2018; Ackert, Prutskova, Zabaev, 2020).

Methodology for respondents who have overcome a spiritual crisis: *Posttraumatic Growth and Depreciation Inventory* (PTGDI-X-SF), developed by R. Tedeschi and colleagues and adapted by N.V. Efremova and co-authors (Tedeschi et al., 2017; Efremova et al., in press).

At the data analysis stage, the sample was divided into three types of religiosity based on the presence of religious affiliation and frequency of church attendance: «Churchgoers», «Affiliated», and «Non-Affiliated».

In **subsection 3.2.2.**, the results of the quantitative testing of Hypotheses 2-5 are presented.

**Hypothesis 2:** The relationship between indicators of spiritual meaning and measures of well-being, meaning-dimensions variables (purpose, coherence, significance), and religious variables (religious coping, religious commitment, centrality of religiosity) is mediated by the experience of undergoing a spiritual crisis.

To test this hypothesis, a correlation analysis of spiritual meaning parameters with other study indicators using Spearman's method was initially conducted. Then, a comparative analysis on correlation matrices obtained from samples with different experiences of spiritual crisis. was performed using pairwise comparison with Fisher's criterion. Below is a table summarizing significant differences in the relationships between indicators of spiritual meaning and study parameters depending on the experiences of spiritual crisis (see Table 1).

Table 1

Comparative analysis of correlation matrices based on indicators of spiritual meaning and other variables depending on experience of spiritual crisis

|                                      | No experience of spiritual crisis |          | Actual experience of spiritual crisis |                | Overcome spiritual crisis |                |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------|---------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|----------------|
|                                      | 1                                 | 2        | 1                                     | 2              | 1                         | 2              |
| Religious intraindividual commitment | 0.393**                           | ↑0.462** | 0.386**                               | <b>0.332**</b> | 0.368**                   | <b>0.282**</b> |
| Positive religious coping            | ↑ <b>0.381**</b>                  | 0.424**  | <b>0.233**</b>                        | 0.317**        | <b>0.341**</b>            | 0.358**        |

|   | No experience of spiritual crisis |                 | Actual experience of spiritual crisis |                | Overcome spiritual crisis |                 |
|---|-----------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
|   | 1                                 | 2               | 1                                     | 2              | 1                         | 2               |
| Intellectual dimension of religiosity centrality    | 0.364**                           | <b>↑0.408**</b> | 0.262**                               | <b>0.248**</b> | 0.326**                   | <b>0.190**</b>  |
| Public practice dimension of religiosity centrality | 0.464**                           | <b>0.277**</b>  | <b>0.241**</b>                        | <b>0.158**</b> | <b>↑0.399**</b>           | <b>↑0.293**</b> |
| Religious value-meaning orientation of (activity)   | <b>0.349**</b>                    | 0.330**         | <b>0.340**</b>                        | 0.294**        | <b>↑0.486**</b>           | 0.314**         |
| Religious value-meaning orientation of              | 0.431**                           | 0.424**         | <b>0.384**</b>                        | 0.340**        | <b>↑0.533**</b>           | 0.356**         |

Note: 1 — Spiritual Meaning (Meaningfulness), 2 — Spiritual Meaning (Calling); coefficients of correlation that demonstrated significant differences among three groups depending on their experience of spiritual crisis are highlighted in bold-framed cells; symbol ↑ indicates the coefficient with the highest absolute value within a pair of differing correlations; \*\*\* —  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* —  $p < 0.01$ ; \* —  $p < 0.05$ .

Thus, **Hypothesis 2 was partially confirmed**: the association between indicators of spiritual meaning and religious variables (religious coping, religious commitment, centrality of religiosity) is mediated by the experience of undergoing a spiritual crisis.

**Hypothesis 3** posits that indicators of spiritual meaning serve as predictors of positive psychological outcomes (happiness, spiritual well-being), particularly in situations involving current experiences of spiritual crises.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted structural modeling where indicators of spiritual meaning acted as predictors, other personal meaning indicators as mediators, and positive functioning indicators (happiness, existential well-being, religious well-being) as the dependent variable. The tested model was replicated only for the dependent variable of happiness and demonstrated satisfactory fit indices ( $\chi^2(286) = 1262.617$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; TLI = 0.900; CFI = 0.912; RMSEA = 0.057 (0.054; 0.060), SRMR = 0.061, AIC = 73993.597, BIC = 74315.648). The substantial contribution of the *Calling* parameter to *Happiness*, indirectly through *Coherence*, was confirmed in the sample of individuals who had overcome a spiritual crisis.

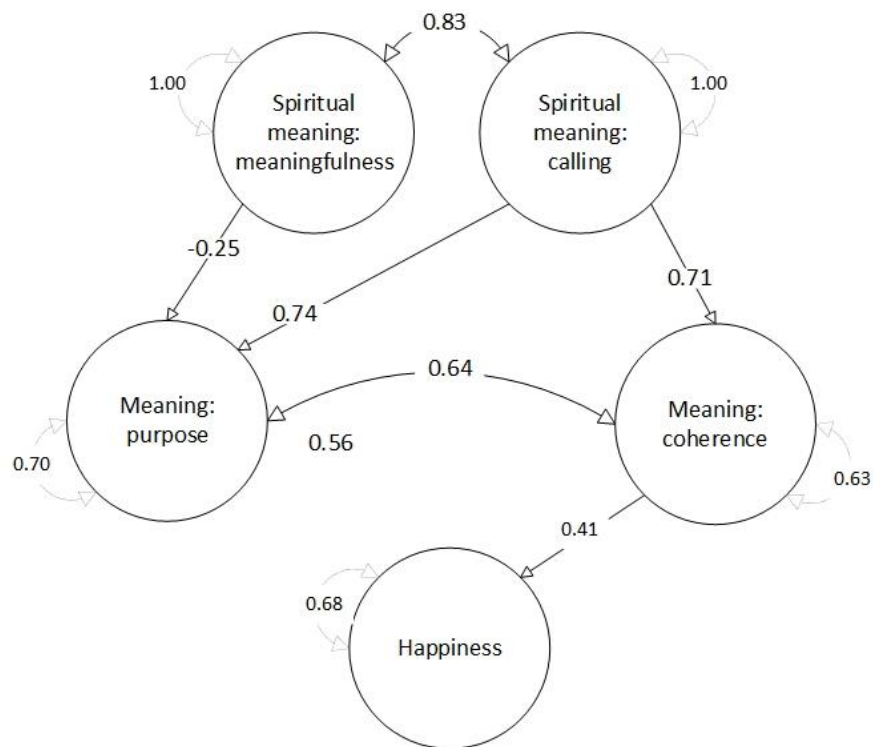


Figure 3. Structural model of the relationships between indicators of spiritual meaning and life value with psychological variables of meaning and happiness

Next, we checked whether indicators of spiritual meaning predict spiritual well-being in the context of spiritual crisis. For this purpose, we conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis, taking into account interrelationships, where the dependent variable was the level of spiritual well-being.

Table 2  
Results of stepwise multiple regression with interaction terms between meaning variables and indicators of spiritual significance in the presence of current or resolved spiritual crisis (dependent variable — existential well-being)

| Variables               |  | Null Model            | Model 1        | Model 2            |
|-------------------------|--|-----------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Intercept               |  | 40.99(0.29)***        | 14.44(1.11)*** | 16.15(4.98)**      |
| Factors                 | <b>Spiritual crisis (actual)</b>                                     | <b>-2.97(0.60)***</b> | -0.52(2.11)    | -4.37(3.51)        |
|                         | <b>Spiritual crisis (overcome)</b>                                   | <b>3.37(0.46)***</b>  | 2.85(2.10)     | 2.11(3.16)         |
| Predictors              | Meaning (Coherence)  |                       | 0.33(0.07)***  | 0.14(0.35)         |
|                         | Meaning (Purpose)  |                       | 0.30(0.06)***  | -0.09(0.28)        |
|                         | Meaning (Significance)   |                       | 0.90(0.08)***  | 1.07(0.42)*        |
| Interactions            | <b>Spiritual crisis (actual) * Spiritual crisis (Meaningfulness)</b> |                       |                | <b>0.29(0.14)*</b> |
| Multiple R <sup>2</sup> |  | 0.11                  | 0.56           | 0.58               |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> |  | 0.11                  | 0.56           | 0.57               |

| Variables | Null Model | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|-----------|------------|---------|---------|
| F         | 29.23      | 114.5   | 114.5   |
| df        | 458        | 978     | 978     |
| p.value   | <0.001     | <0.001  | <0.001  |

Note: Socio-demographic variables (gender, age) did not make a significant contribution to model metrics and are therefore not presented within this table. Multiple R<sup>2</sup> — coefficient of determination; Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> — adjusted coefficient of determination; F — Fisher's criterion; df — degrees of freedom; interactions between meaning measures and indicators of spiritual significance were omitted from the table due to their lack of significant impact on the dependent variable at all stages; predictors that significantly influence the dependent variable are highlighted in bold; \* — p<.05, \*\* — p<.01, \*\*\* — p<.001.

According to the regression analysis results, in a model accounting for all variables and their interactions, in the current experience of spiritual crisis, the *Meaningfulness* parameter makes a significant contribution to *Spiritual well-being (existential)*, such that an increase in *Meaningfulness* by 1 unit increases the *Spiritual well-being (existential)* indicator by 0.29 (p<0.05).

Thus, **Hypothesis 3 has been confirmed.**

**Hypothesis 4** states that among believers, indicators of spiritual meaning mediate the relationship between religious value-meaning orientations and depth of religious faith.

To test the hypothesis about the mediating role of spiritual meaning indicators in relation to the effects of religious value-meaning orientations on other religious parameters, we conducted structural modeling, taking into account direct and indirect effects on the following variables: 1) religious commitment (intra-individual and inter-individual), 2) religious coping (positive and negative), 3) centrality of religiosity (intellectual dimension, ideological dimension, public practice, personal practice and experience). The results of structural modeling are presented in the form of figures (see Fig. 3, Fig. 4, Fig. 5).

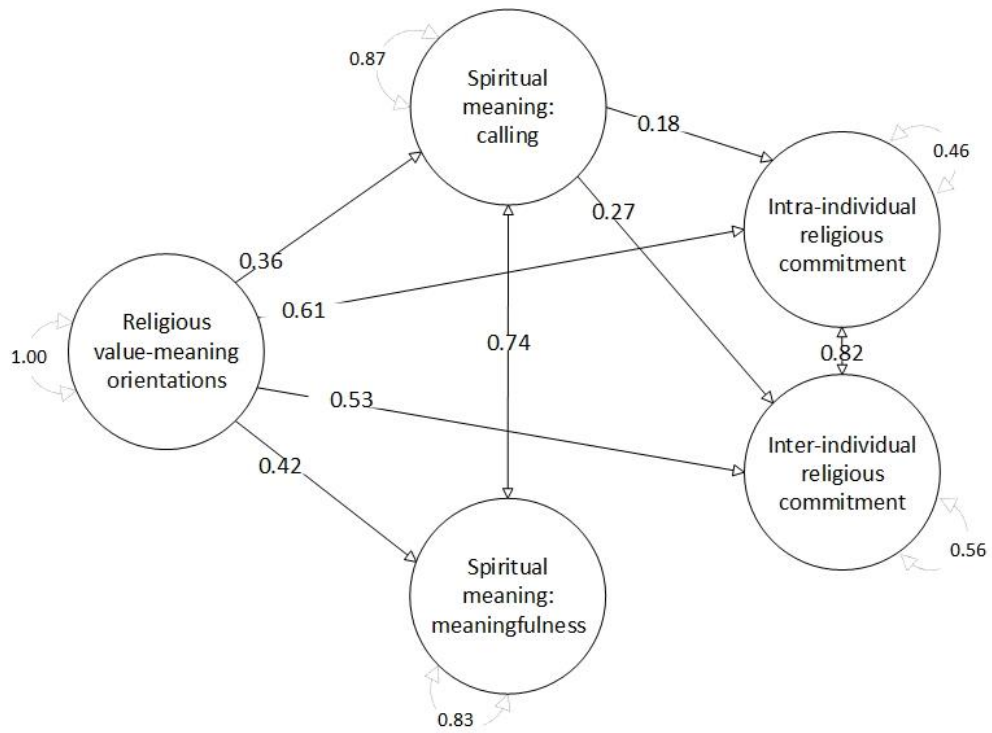


Figure 3. Structural model of mediation effects of indicators of spiritual meaning on the relationships between the parameter of religious value-meaning orientations and indicators of religious commitment. Factor loadings on latent variables were taken into account but not presented in the figure for visual simplification ( $\chi^2(451) = 2051.806, p < 0.001$ ; TLI = 0.905; CFI = 0.914; RMSEA = 0.061 (0.058; 0.064), SRMR = 0.056, AIC = 68299.274, BIC = 68673.947).

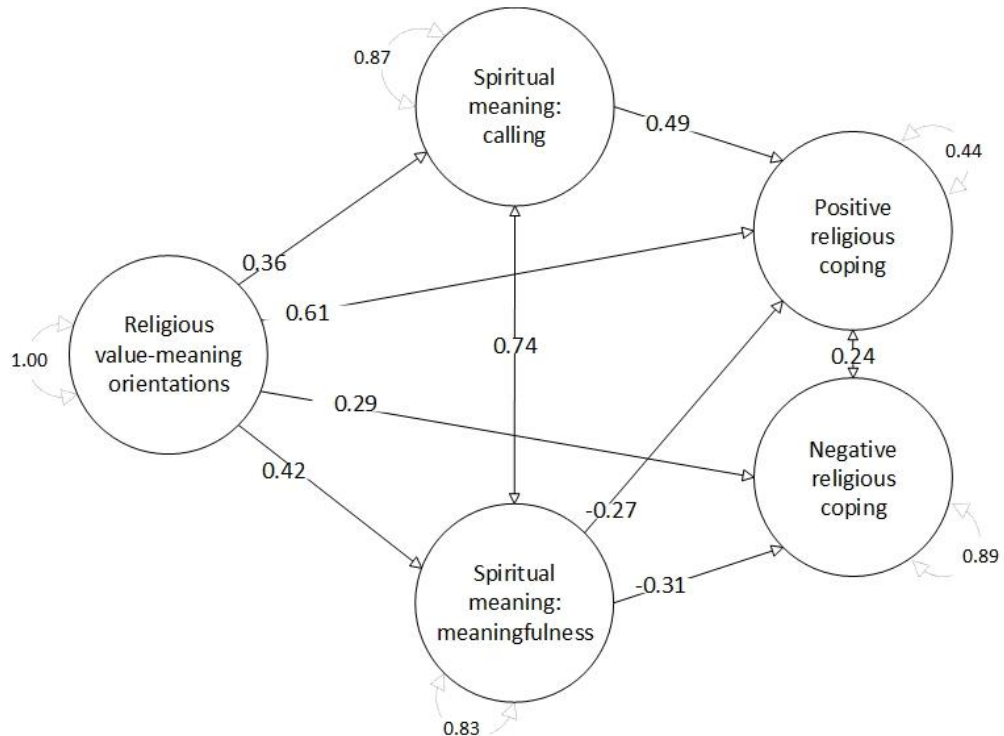


Figure 4. Structural model of the mediating effects of indicators of spiritual meaning on the relationship between the parameter of religious value-meaning orientations and indicators of religious coping. Factor loadings on latent variables were considered but not presented in the figure for visual simplification ( $\chi^2(581) = 2303.997, p < 0.001$ ; TLI = 0.904; CFI = 0.912; RMSEA = 0.053 (0.050; 0.055), SRMR = 0.064, AIC = 78035.547, BIC = 78458.879).

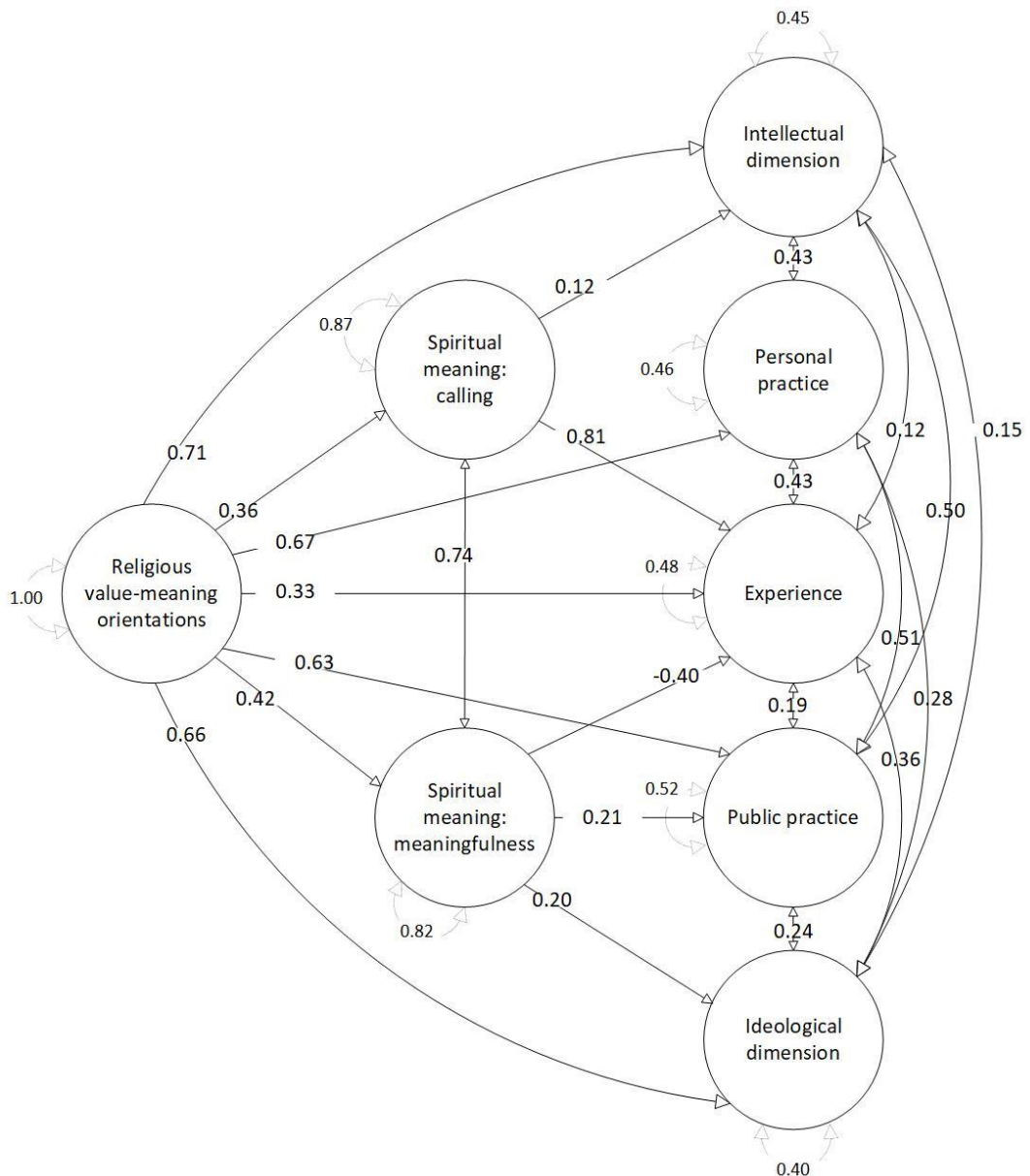


Figure 5. Structural model of the mediating effects of indicators of spiritual meaning on the relationship between the parameter of religious value-meaning orientations and indicators of religious centrality. Factor loadings on latent variables were considered but not presented in the figure for visual simplification ( $\chi^2(581) = 2303.997, p < 0.001$ ; TLI = 0.894; CFI = 0.902; RMSEA = 0.056 (0.053; 0.058), SRMR = 0.064, AIC = 78205.916, BIC = 78619.517).

Thus, **Hypothesis 5 was confirmed.**

In **Section 3.2.3**, a discussion of the obtained results is presented. In most cases, the weakest correlation coefficients between indicators of spiritual significance and religious variables are observed among those experiencing an ongoing spiritual crisis. This is consistent with findings from other studies where weakened correlations have been reported for samples representing challenging developmental conditions such as individuals with disabilities (Lebedeva, 2012) or homeless people (Vitko, 2020).

Interpretations of the tendency to suppress the effect of Religious Value-Meaning Orientations on Experience by the Meaningfulness indicator are given. Thus, the content of the Experience indicator is discussed as related to mystical-like experiences, which, in turn, may occur with a lower sense of spiritual meaning in situations of spiritual crisis or psychopathology.

Among all meaning indicators in this study, only spiritual meaning in a situation of spiritual crisis provided an increase in spiritual well-being. However, the spiritual meaning parameter does not necessarily demonstrate the highest indicator after overcoming a spiritual crisis. As A.M. Dvoynin (2009) notes, the enthusiastic experience of higher meanings does not yet mean a genuine change in a person's life relationships. The experience of spiritual meaning only precedes the zone of the possible, but the embodiment of this possible in oneself requires practical affirmation of it in real being through changing one's own meaning and life relationships:

After describing two empirical studies, **General conclusions based on the results of the dissertation research** are presented. In the **Conclusion**, the results of the work are summarized. According to the results of the study, the general hypothesis was confirmed that spiritual meaning facilitates overcoming a spiritual crisis and ensures positive functioning of the individual throughout its course. The obtained results indicate that spiritual meaning acts as a «nuclear structure» providing processes at two levels: 1) the level of «large» dynamics of meaning systems during the individual's overcoming of the previous level of self-regulation; 2) the level of «small» dynamics, acting as the highest meaning structure integrating the meaning system around what is recognized by the individual as transcendent (sacred). At these levels, spiritual meaning provides *structuring, regulatory, energetic, resource, stimulating, and guiding* functions in the system of personality self-regulation. Limitations of the study, prospects, and practical significance of the obtained results are also discussed.

## **General conclusions based on the results of the dissertation research**

1. Spirituality is conceptualized as the highest level of personality regulation—a mode of personal being defined by orientation toward a broad context of transcendent and universal human values. Functioning at this spiritual level of regulation and transcending prior logics of meaning-system organization is achieved through engagement with spiritual meaning.

2. Spiritual crisis is understood as an acute contradiction between an individual's existing meaning system and higher-order symbolic or semiotic forms of the sacred, resulting in the disintegration of the coherent structure of consciousness. This crisis unfolds within an existential–spiritual (transcendent) situation that dismantles the foundational constituents of the self, thereby threatening personal integrity. Such a situation belongs to the class of extraordinary experiences, as it poses a profound meaning-based challenge to the very inner logic of a person's existence and compels them to struggle for their own humanity.

3. The dissolution of rigid meaning structures is a necessary precondition for the emergence of spiritual meaning. Spiritual meaning is defined as a distinct form of meaning that transcends the individual's immediate life-world and organizes personal integrity from the perspective of a higher (sacred) value.

4. Overcoming a spiritual crisis is associated with the individual's attainment of spiritual meaning, which—when integrated into the dynamic meaning system in accordance with the developmental principles of higher mental functions—can become a source of an alternative mode of personality regulation. Functionally, spiritual meaning manifests as a psychological phenomenon that mediates the individual's connection with the transcendent, emerging as a result of navigating a spiritual critical situation and subsequently serving both as a generator (in the construction of new meaning structures) and as a regulator (in the ongoing functioning of spiritual regulation).

5. The relationship between indicators of spiritual meaning and dimensions of religiosity is mediated by the experience of spiritual crisis.

6. The sense of calling—as an indicator of spiritual meaning—predicts subjective well-being indirectly through other meaning-related structures, such as the perception of coherence in life events and a clear understanding of one's place in the world.

7. Spiritual meaning can be considered a predictor of spiritual well-being in critical situations. Among individuals who do not identify with any religious denomination, spiritual meaning is most intensely experienced precisely during spiritual crisis.

8. The interrelation between religious value-meaning orientations and the depth of religious faith is conditioned by the presence of spiritual meaning in believers, which serves to regulate how religious values are enacted and embodied in their religious lives.

9. Within the system of personality regulation, spiritual meaning fulfills the following functions: 1) a *transformative* and *structuring* function, organizing a new integrity of dynamic meaning systems; 2) a *regulatory* function, operating both as a deep, transformative meaning that guides personality development during critical situations and as a subjectively experienced life design that functions as a psychological tool for organizing dynamic meaning systems within personality regulation; 3) an *energetic* function, providing content that enriches and saturates hierarchically subordinate components of the dynamic meaning system; 4) a *resource* function, contributing to personal well-being during the experience of spiritual crisis; and 5) a *stimulating* and *orienting* function, facilitating the integration of religious values into concrete expressions of religious life among believers and supporting the depth of religious faith.

The work was carried out at the «International Laboratory of Positive Psychology of Personality and Motivation» of the National Research University «Higher School of Economics».

## **Main content of the dissertation is reflected in the following publications**

Publications based on dissertation research materials in peer-reviewed journals included in the «white list» of HSE University:

1. Lebedeva A. A., Vitko Yu. S., Korshunov D. S. The functional role of spiritual meaning in experiencing spiritual crisis // *Psychology. Journal of the Higher School of Economics*. 2025. Vol. 22. No. 1. P. 139–163.

2. Vitko Yu. S., Lebedeva A. A. Spiritual meaning: Conceptual possibilities and prospects for use in psychology // *World of Psychology. Scientific and methodological journal*. 2024. No. 1(116). P. 5–21.

3. Vitko Yu. S., Zolotareva A. A., Lebedeva A. A., Lynch M. F. Adaptation of the Russian-language version of N. Mascaró's Spiritual Meaning Scale // *Issues of Psychology*. 2022. Vol. 68. No. 4. P. 125–138.

4. Vitko Yu. S. Prospects for using the concept of «spiritual regulation» in psychological research on spirituality and religiosity // *Issues of Psychology*. 2024. Vol. 70. No. 6. P. 15–27.

Scientific publications in other editions:

1. Vitko Yu. S., Lebedeva A. A. Change in higher meaning in the narrative of people with experience of spiritual crisis // In: *Personality in extreme conditions and crisis situations of life activity. Collection of scientific articles of the XIII International Scientific and Practical Conference (Vladivostok, July 5-7, 2024)*. / Ed. by R. V. Kadyrov. Ulyanovsk: Zebra, 2024. P. 62–68.

2. Vitko Yu. S., Lebedeva A. A. Directorial staging of intention: Development of a psychotechnical methodology based on F.E. Vasilyuk's ideas // In: *Proceedings of the International Scientific and Practical Conference (Sevastopol, May 16-17, 2024)*. / Ed. by E. E. Blinova. IT «Arial», 2024. P. 286–291.

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4. Vitko, Yu. S., & Lebedeva, A. A. Spiritual meaning as a unit of analysis of the spiritual dimension of personality. In A. M. Dvoinin, A. L. Zhuravlev, & A. Yurevich (Eds.), *Psikhologiya religii: proshloye i sovremennost'* [Psychology of religion: Past and present] (pp. 317–346). Moscow: Institut psikhologii RAN, 2025.

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