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# The Importance of the Experience of God’s Absence, and of Meaning in Life, in the Development of Sensitivity of Conscience among Polish University Students

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**Abstract:** The aims of the research presented here are as follows: (a) to define the degree of perceived meaning in life and the level of sensitivity of conscience in groups of students with a high (H) and low (L) level of experience of God’s absence; and (b) to show the relationship between perceived meaning in life and sensitivity of conscience in groups of students with a high (H) and low (L) level of experience of God’s absence. The results show that students with a high level of experience of God’s absence appear to have a high level of both perceived meaning in life and sensitivity of conscience with respect to both themselves and others. Moreover, in a group of students with a high level of experience of God’s absence, meaning in life is found to be strongly related, along with sensitivity of conscience, to both their moral values and their surroundings.

**Keywords:** meaning in life; sensitivity of conscience; students; religious experience of God’s absence

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## 1. Introduction

According to many commentators, human beings only realize their full potential—both in individual and in social terms—when they develop a conscience (*i.e.*, the ability to evaluate human behavior according to accepted norms and one’s own sense of what is good), feel that life is meaningful, and experience God. However, scholarly literature defining and describing the human development of conscience and connection to the divine lacks some clarity, due to the divergent methodological and anthropological assumptions often involved in studying the more esoteric dimensions of human life. Some scientists

sought to demonstrate the existence of a definite correlation between spirituality and psycho-social fortitude [1–3]. Drawing inspiration from previous work examining the Divine's influence on conscience development, the present paper seeks to further illuminate the relations between these concepts through an analysis of the relationship between religious experience of God's absence, perceptions of one's life as meaningful, and sensitivity of conscience in the context of the lives of Polish university students.

### 1.1. Religious Experience

Pertinent literature demonstrates that religious experience has been understood in a variety of ways within the psychology of religion. As James [4] and Gruehn [5] assert, the very experience of religion itself, together with the various related components of religious experience (e.g., worship, prayer, faith, *etc.*), constitutes a distinctive form of human experience—one lived out with an understanding of the Divine as the ultimate locus of value. Additionally, Otto [6] understands religious experience as a specific feeling of mystery, both fascinating and disturbing, and only possible due to the possession of a special cognitive power—the *sensus numinis*. For Otto [6], religious experience takes the form of an internally felt, direct experience of *sacrum* present in human activities. Thus, religious experience is a process, simultaneously affective and intellectual, in which the individual develops a sense that they possess a direct connection with both the *sacrum* itself, and the effects thereof. Scheler [7] provides another perspective, explaining that religious experience has an axiological character, being a direct depiction of religious values that can be only attributed to the Absolute. Other scholars seek to prove that in their origins, religious experiences may have little or nothing to do with religion itself. For instance, some claim that religious experience could be the result of a conflict between the *id* and *ego* within the human psyche [8]. Others claim that interludes with the divine can be purposely accessed by ingesting psychedelic drugs [9,10]. Quite often, separate identification is proposed between spiritual experiences induced by psychedelic substances (boundary experiences) or artificially stimulated brain activity (neuro-theology), and religious experience attributed to God's special attention [11,12]. On the one hand, religious experience may be viewed positively for its inspirational qualities that encourage individuals to reexamine their own life choices, along with the social state of society [6]. Positive religious experiences may also facilitate a deepening of one's interpersonal relationships [13,14], while providing new opportunities for spiritual and social experience [15] and lifting one out of scripted patterns of thought and action [5,16]. On the other hand, as suggested by Freud [17,18] and others [19], religious experiences may also be viewed critically for failing to add anything of tangible value to human life, since some consider religious teachings as little more than illusions responsible for inculcating neurotic disorders.

Researchers who have analyzed the experiences of great mystics have observed that religious experience exhibits several salient features. For example, religious experiences seem to possess both a transcendental and an immanent dimension, involving the whole person (including mind, will, and feelings), and fostering a profound sense of unity that is recognized as divine in nature. Those who have had a religious experience report having a sense that is noetic in character, with a source of knowledge in its own right, and that the experience cannot be described in words. Often linked to these spiritual encounters is a conviction that the divine presence itself had positive effects on the human participant [4,5,20].

Utilizing theoretical concepts developed by James Allport and Maslow, investigators have established several tools for the purpose of studying religious experience: the Mysticism Scale [21,22], the Centrality

of Religiosity Scale [23], and the Mystical Experience Questionnaire [24]. These research tools have demonstrated that there are significant relations between religious experience and social background [25], religious experience and self-actualization, mental health and happiness [26,27], religious experience and intensity of prayer [28], and religious experience and personal well-being [16].

Analysis of the mystics' writings reveals that religious experiences are taken to have been caused by God (e.g., Juan de la Cruz, Ignacio de Loyola, Teresa de Avila) [29,30]. Such mystics reported two distinct states of spiritual consciousness, both linked to the supernatural sphere: in some cases, mystics were acutely aware of God's presence in their lives, while other mystics were conscious of God having left them, in that they felt the absence of God in their lives. In short, mystics identified two seemingly polarized religious experiences: that of God's presence, and that of God's absence. In spite of their differences, these religious experiences had both individual and social value: the individual value was found in the contributions religious experiences made to the development and perfection of an individual's personal life, whereas the social value rests on the notion that people who have had religious experiences empower others to pursue spiritually enlightened experiences. Casting aside initial conceptions of polarity between experiencing God's presence or absence, these experiences could also be understood as complementary, as they pertain to both the mental and spiritual realms of an individual. It is clear that what has counted as a decisive form of religious experience includes elements contributed by both humankind and the Divine. Another point is that religious experience of this kind is taken to have a cognitive character, enriching people by bringing something new and positive into daily life. Through religious experiences, individuals can gain new knowledge about their inner being, about other people, and about God. But such experiences also exhibit an emotional dimension, with feelings of joy, gratitude, anxiety, *etc.*, appearing in people's lives. Divine encounters may also become behaviorally significant, manifesting as heightened involvement with and commitment to other people or social groups, and in increased concern for one's own religious life.

With particular reference to Christian mysticism, where it seems appropriate to distinguish between the object of religion (God personified), the subject of religion (a human being), and a religious relation that is essentially personal in character [31–33], the present author created a tool for studying the religious experience of both God's presence and God's absence: the Scale of Religious Experience (SRE) [31]. The SRE will be employed for the purposes of this article, and comprises statements relating to the Christian religion, including those pertaining to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of the religious experience of God's presence and God's absence as described above.

## 1.2. *Meaning in Life*

In psychology, the concept of meaning in life refers to the notion that human action is oriented towards the future [34], which is understood as a condition for the individual's normal functioning [35]. Meaning in life can refer to a person's endeavor to successfully perform certain roles in society [36], and additionally relates to the gaining of satisfaction and pleasure from life [37]. According to Adler [38], achievement of meaning in life lies in self-improvement and overcoming one's weaknesses, while also considering the interests of others within one's society. For Freud [8], life meaning corresponds to the arrival at a state of satisfaction with one's life. Frankl [15], the inventor of logotherapy, worked out a conception that complements Adler's and Freud's, and it is Frankl's concept that serves as a basis for

the investigations presented here. According to Frankl, meaning in life can be considered as both a human need and the process of working toward the fulfillment of that need [39]. Furthermore, Frankl suggests that “will to meaning” dynamically motivates a human being to undertake actions that satisfy his or her psychological and/or spiritual needs, including seeking meaning in life, which has a mental-spiritual characteristic. Finding meaning in life is elusive for some, but it is a necessary condition for complete individual development and for self-realization as a person. Meaning in life is a motivating force for a person’s actions, and the pursuit of meaning in life is a sign of good mental health and healthy relations with others. Frankl [40] also suggests that failing to develop a sense of meaning in life engenders an existential vacuum, which may trigger neuroses. According to Frankl, meaning in life may manifest as a deep sense of satisfaction and well-being—a sense that is a consequence of involvement in the search for fulfillment of one’s own life goals in the context of societal values. So a human being only becomes fulfilled when the meaning of life has been discovered, pursued, and realized—in relation to significant others, to societal values, and to the Ultimate Reality. Frankl [15] also suggests that meaning in life is one of the psycho-social determinants of religiosity and personality. He sets out to exhibit meaning in life as it relates to life goals, defining these as personally important objectives that individuals pursue in their daily lives.

In order to relate concerns about meaning in life to the empirical findings of our investigation, in this paper we shall be employing a test: the Purpose in Life Test, which was created on the basis of Frankl’s theory by Crumbaugh and Maholick [41], and has since been adapted to reflect features specific to Polish culture by Popielski [42]. We should first note that Frankl’s theory has already been empirically verified by a number of researchers, and it has emerged that people with a relatively elevated sense of meaning in life also show a higher level of life satisfaction [43]. Those with higher levels of meaning in life also have more respect for values that are specifically religious in nature, and they also employ a constructive approach to managing difficult situations [44]. What is more, people with a stronger sense of meaning in life reveal a higher level of altruism [45] than individuals with a low level of meaning in life. According to other research findings, people with a high level of life satisfaction also exhibit a high level of spiritual experience [46]. Moreover, there is an observable relationship between having so-called “transcendental experiences” and well-being [47], and a significant link between the sense of meaning in life and what we would describe as “Transcendence” itself [48].

### *1.3. Sensitivity of Conscience*

As with the concepts of religious experience and meaning in life, in psychology the understanding of the human conscience is rife with complexity. According to Durkheim [49], conscience is a product of social life—an internalization of bans and dictates allowing a person to assess their own actions. In Freud’s view [8], the function of a conscience in human life is performed by the super-ego, which assesses a person’s particular activities and outlines an appropriate mode of behavior. However, Adler [38] sees conscience as a sort of built-in safety mechanism for living, rather than as serving to differentiate between right and wrong. On one hand, conscience is an innate inclination for processing and remembering experiences and dictates, and on the other hand, conscience is a disposition towards development that is effected by an individual’s lifestyle and personal conflicts. Additionally, Fromm [50] describes authoritarian and humanistic forms of conscience. The authoritarian conscience is the voice of an internalized

authority, such as parents, institutions, the state, *etc.*, representing the moral law in a given society. Conversely, the humanistic conscience is our own inner voice, present in every person and independent of external sanctions or rewards. It is motivated by the human I. According to Frankl [39], conscience as an immanent psychological fact is the voice of Transcendence: supernatural existence itself speaking through the human conscience. The latter is an organ (or a tool) of meaning in life, which helps bring forth that meaning [40]. Chlewiński [51] claims that conscience has a clear structure: it is an acquired cognitive-evaluative structure directed at one's own behavior, and it is part of the human personality from which an evaluative-imperative judgment is generated, concerning the individual's plans for acting in the social sphere. According to other researchers, the human conscience performs multiple functions: it assists in determining appropriate courses of action [50], makes choices [52], organizes the world of values [39], and confronts human agents with the future [53].

According to Allport [54], meaning in life is closely connected with the conscience, as the latter is responsible, in a regulative sense, for keeping life's meaning up-to-date. Conscience, then, constitutes an important element of a person's inner (psychological-spiritual) reality. Allport [54] believes conscience amounts to the ability of individuals to evaluate, make the right choices, and undertake actions in accordance with the accepted norms of individual and social life. Conscience is also the ability to choose appropriate or moral values, and what is more or less instrumentally valuable for the development of a given individual. One's conscience is comprised of a set of rules a person may use, reference points to assess their own conduct relative to the internalized moral norms and values set forth by society. Similarly, the conscience may be thought of as a control system, as it signals whether a given action has had good results. In the latter role, conscience includes attitudes not only towards oneself, but also towards other people, one's surroundings, and one's values—and to Ultimate Reality. A human conscience should possess a critical feature: sensitivity—one of the characteristics indicative of a mature conscience. Allport suggests that sensitivity of conscience is the human capacity to react to indications of what is of moral or social value, in both subjective and objective dimensions [1,54]. Sensitive reactions are manifested in specific, but relatively enduring, behavioral traits, such as result from learning and personal self-development, including the shaping of one's personality.

Here we adopt the construct of conscience set forth by Allport [55]. Taking Allport's conception of conscience as a basis, Buksik [56] has designed an investigative tool for measuring sensitivity of conscience—referred to from here on as the Scale of Sensitivity to Conscience—which we intend to make use of within this research. At the same time, let us note the important findings of the research of Piaget [57] and Kohlberg [58] into human moral development and the shaping of human conscience. These theorists demonstrate beyond doubt that conscience and its sensitivity are acquired through the course of individuals' socialization within a given culture. Hoffman [59] notes a correlation between the quality of an individual's moral behavior and his or her personality. Buksik's studies [56] show that women reveal a higher sensitivity of conscience towards themselves and others than do men, and that children whose fathers completed vocational education have a higher level of sensitivity of conscience to themselves and others than do children whose fathers are university graduates. In addition, both a higher level of self-knowledge and deeper religiosity amongst women are accompanied by an elevated sensitivity of conscience to values and social surroundings. While the level of sensitivity of conscience to values and surroundings shows no significant relation to the place of residence of the subjects studied,

Kisiel's studies [60] show that people who have received a religious education have a greater sensitivity of conscience to others than those who have not.

#### *1.4. The Research Problem and Principal Objective*

The results obtained from applying the Scale of Religious Experience (SRE) to groups of young people reveal that the same group of students scored highly in both the sub-scale of experience of God's presence and in the sub-scale of God's absence. Another group, however, scored higher in the sub-scale of experience of God's presence while obtaining lower scores in the sub-scale of God's absence [31,61]. Young people with a high level of experience of God's absence reveal greater involvement in the pursuit of goals and meaning in life, as well as greater curiosity in seeking out something new, than those with a low level [62]. Meanwhile, students with a high level of sensitivity of conscience towards oneself and others reveal the same level of experience of God's absence as young people exhibiting a low level [62]. Moreover, young people with a low level of experience of God's absence appear to attach greater value to helpfulness and success in life than do people with a high level of that experience [31]. In the lives of young women, the experience of God's absence shows a strong relation to altruism, whereas men's experience of God's absence has a strong relation with their own life goals. In the lives of young university students with a high level of empathy, instrumental values pertaining to competence (e.g., logical thinking and independence) contribute most to explaining the variance regarding experience of God's absence. For students with a low level of empathy, an instrumental value with respect to moral character—helpfulness—seems to influence the experience of God's absence most of all [31,63]. The attainment of life goals and affirmation of one's own life contributed more greatly in accounting for the variance of the experience of God's absence in a group of students with a high level of sensitivity of conscience towards oneself and moral values, than it did for a group with a low level of sensitivity of conscience [31]. At the same time, the results of studies examining the strength of the relation between these variables are somewhat ambiguous. There is a noticeable lack of detailed investigation into the relationship between religious experiences of God's absence, meaning in life, and sensitivity to conscience, and this dearth of credible research warrants further research in this area.

Another relevant issue concerns the choice of research participants for an investigative study of this nature. Poland, where the research for this article was conducted, is currently undergoing a period of socioeconomic change, with many citizens engaged in the search for new solutions to current social, political, and economic issues. Young people seem especially affected by a transition from one set of values to another, as they are already working through a life stage that is commonly associated with changes to youths' relationship with religious matters [64]. Taking these points into account, it seems logical to conduct a study such as this among young Polish university students. In early adulthood, young people who have already passed through the turbulent developmental changes that result in biological and social adulthood have an awareness of their capacity to procreate, their new social responsibilities, the foray into professional work, and the need for autonomy in directing the course of their own lives [56,65]. Hence, Polish students are a potentially fruitful sample for exploring the focal issues of the present study.

Our overview of the relevant literature suggests that sensitivity of conscience, meaning in life, and religious experience of God's presence and absence may each perform important functions in the life of

an individual. It seems likely that people feel fulfilled when they achieve a level of perfection in their lives, establish positive and unselfish relations with others, and create personally significant relations with God through the experience of Divine presence or absence. Crucially, meaning in life is perceived as both a *state of being* and an *intrinsic need*. In the former case, meaning in life is connected with a subjective experience of significance within one's own life. In the latter instance, meaning in life only finds realization through one's pursuit and attainment of personal goals, and through affirmation of one's own life. Moreover, seeking meaning in life facilitates the development of conscience, defined as the capacity of individuals to make choices and evaluate what is more and less instrumentally beneficial to their overall life progress. If conscience calls the human being to lead a productive life and attain significant goals, then a sensitive conscience will be alert to whether or not one is succeeding in interacting with oneself, others, and God.

Nevertheless, more questions arise here. To what extent do the level and quality of individual experiences of God's absence modify students' felt sense of meaning in life, of goal attainment, and of life affirmation? Here, we should remind the reader of what was stated earlier: that individuals' felt sense of meaning in life is taken to be disclosed not only in their sense of whether a state of meaningfulness has been realized, but also in the form of something inseparable from their attainment of goals and their own affirmation of life. Moreover, how far does perceived meaning in life determine the sensitivity of students' consciences towards themselves and others, to moral values, and to their surroundings? We may reasonably take these to be revealed in actual life by how students react to what is considered moral in normatively valid ways.

The existence of relationships between the previously delineated variables would suggest that young people with a high level of experience of God's absence ought also to exhibit a higher level of meaning in life and sensitivity of conscience than those whose level of experience is low. We might also expect to find that variables relating to meaning in life that also bear a significant relation to sensitivity of conscience would turn out to be different, when groups with high and low levels of experience of God's absence are compared.

### 1.5. Hypotheses

Based on what has been presented thus far, the following hypotheses can be explored:

*Hypothesis 1.* Students with a high level of religious experience of God's absence exhibit high levels of meaning in life, of goal attainment, and of life affirmation.

*Hypothesis 2.* In a group of students with a high level of experience of God's absence, the sense of meaning in life contributes greatly to explaining variance with respect to sensitivity of conscience towards oneself and others.

*Hypothesis 3.* In a group of students with a high level of experience of God's absence, attainment of goals and affirmation of their own lives contribute greatly to explaining variance in sensitivity of conscience with regard to moral values and surroundings.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and Procedures

Bearing in mind all of the abovementioned premises, some additional features of this study should be outlined. The research for this article was conducted between 2011 and 2013 in Krakow, Poland, among male students of electrical engineering, who claimed to have experienced God's presence and God's absence in their lives. All of the 205 students who participated in the study belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. In over a dozen cases, sets of test questions were only partially completed, with the subjects who had failed to provide answers to all of the questions consequently being excluded from the study. The analysis and results are based on 180 correctly completed questionnaires. The age of the respondents ranged from 21 to 25 ( $M = 23.8$ ;  $SD = 5.332$ ), and the subject group consisted of students from several non-Catholic Polish state universities. All of the participants were native Poles of culturally homogeneous provenance who professed to come from families of average affluence.

### 2.2. Instruments

In order to test the hypotheses of this study, the following tools were applied:

- (a) This author's Scale of Religious Experience (SRE). The present author created a study tool for measuring the intensity of religious experience, comprising a set of 37 statements referring to the Christian religion, assessed on a seven-point Likert scale. For the interpretation of the results of factor analysis, variables (statements) whose loadings exceeded 0.400 were taken into account. The scale comprises three sub-scales. The first one describes the intensity of experience of God in general (DB); Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency is 0.92. The second sub-scale serves to measure the intensity of experience of God's presence (OB), with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency at 0.94. The third sub-scale describes the intensity of experience of God's absence (NB). Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency is also high and stands at 0.91 [31,63]. The scale was tested on several samples. The results obtained are related. The correlation coefficients are at a high level and positive (0.54–0.64). In the present study, the third sub-scale was used (see Appendix). Criterion of validity: correlation (Spearman's  $\rho$ ) between the SRE and Prezyna's Scale of Religious Attitude at 0.63.
- (b) The Purpose in Life Test (PLT) of Crumbaugh and Maholick [41], used in order to define the intensity of the experience of meaning in life. The starting point here was an operational understanding of meaning in life. The test consisted of three parts, with only the first of these being used in the present paper. The classification of statements in this first part was carried out as described below. All the statements were grouped into three sets: the sense of meaning in life (SZ), where this factor was meant to register the intensity of the sense of meaning (inner satisfaction), attainment of life goals (CZ), and, finally, affirmation of life (DZ), with the last two both treated as capturing something indicative of fulfillment of the need for meaning in life. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency for consecutive sub-scales ranges from 0.88 to 0.92. The reliability indicator, calculated using Pearson's  $r$  for the present, revised list of statements, was 0.88, or 0.90 after verification with the Spearman-Brown formula [42].



- (c) The Sensitivity of Conscience Scale (SCS) of Buksik [56], aimed at investigating conscience. This has a seven-point continuum of answer categories for each of its 31 statements, and consists of two sub-scales, comprising statements intended to examine sensitivity of conscience with respect to oneself and others (WSI), and with regard to moral values and one's surroundings (WSWM), respectively. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency for consecutive sub-scales ranges from 0.87 to 0.91. The scale was tested on several samples, which included students and elderly people. The results obtained were related, with correlation coefficients at a high level and showing up as positive (0.50–0.62). The reliability indicator calculated using the test-retest method was 0.72.

### 2.3. Statistical Analysis

The variable relating specifically to religious experience—God's absence—was dichotomized, with the values obtained in the Scale of Religious Experience (SRE) providing the basis for the dichotomy. The criterion here was the level of religious experience of God's absence. Two groups of people were formed: those with low (L) and those with high (H) results regarding this experience. Low results fell within the range  $\leq 3.5$ , whereas high results fell within  $\geq 5.5$ . The group of students with low results consisted of 52 people, with a mean result ( $M$ ) for the group of 3.1 ( $SD = 6.121$ ). The group of students with high results was made up of 60 people, and its mean result ( $M$ ) was 5.9 ( $SD = 7.096$ ). There was a statistically significant difference between the results of the two groups, with  $F = 41.97$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The distribution was unimodal, so the cutting points were defined to maximize the differences in scores between the high (H) and low (L) groups. The middle (between 3.5 and 5.5) was excluded in the analysis, although it contained 68 persons. Hence the ratios of the groups were L—29%, M—38%, H—33%.

The results for participants with high and low levels of experience of God's absence obtained using the Purpose in Life Test (PLT) and the Sensitivity of Conscience Scale (SCS) were then interpreted. Their analysis was carried out on the basis of mean values ( $M$ ) and standard deviations ( $SD$ ). Variance was analyzed (ANOVA), and the procedure of multiple stepwise regression analysis applied.

## 3. Results

Analysis of the results made it possible to verify the validity of the principal questions and hypotheses of this study, concerning the relations between meaning in life, sensitivity of conscience, and the religious experience of God's absence in the lives of students.

### 3.1. The Level of Meaning in Life and Sensitivity of Conscience in Groups of Students with a High and a Low Level of Experience of God's Absence

The values obtained in the Purpose in Life Test (PLT) suggest noticeable, statistically significant differences between students with a high level of experience of God's absence and those with a low level (Table 1). Students with a high level of experience of God's absence reveal a higher level of their sense of meaning in life (SZ) ( $p < 0.01$ ), attainment of life goals (CZ) ( $p < 0.001$ ), and affirmation of their own life (DZ) ( $p < 0.05$ ) than students characterized by a low level of experience of God's absence. However, the values obtained in the Sensitivity of Conscience Scale (SCS) show that there is a statistically significant difference between students with a high level of experience of God's absence and those with a low level

of it, but only in respect of one factor. Students with a high level of experience of God's absence are characterized by a higher level of sensitivity to themselves and others (WSI) ( $p < 0.01$ ) compared to students with a low level of experience.

**Table 1.** The analysis of variance (ANOVA), value of the  $F$ -test, and the level of significance  $p$  for the variables in the groups with a high (H) and a low (L) level of experience of God's absence relating to meaning in life: a sense of meaning in life (SZ), attainment of goals (CZ), affirmation of life (DZ), and sensitivity of conscience—either towards oneself and others (WSI), or in relation to moral values and one's surroundings (WSWM).

Factors	Students with a High Level of Experience of God's Absence (H)		Students with a Low Level of Experience of God's Absence (L)		$F$	$df$	$p$
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$			
SZ	5.06	0.931	4.15	0.982	14.51	1	<0.01
CZ	5.77	0.782	4.29	1.284	16.04	1	<0.001
DZ	5.29	0.884	4.74	0.866	4.15	1	<0.05
WSI	6.20	1.231	5.15	0.972	8.53	1	<0.01
WSWM	5.15	1.412	4.60	0.917	0.78	1	>0.05

### 3.2. Relation of Meaning of Life to Sensitivity of Conscience towards Oneself and Others, in Groups of Students with a High and a Low Level of Experience of God's Absence

The three independent variables relating to meaning in life—one's sense of meaning in life (SZ), attainment of life goals (CZ), and affirmation of life (DZ)—all exhibit a significant relation to sensitivity of conscience towards oneself and others (WSI) in the group of students with a high (H) level of experience of God's absence (Table 2). The first independent variable (SZ) relating to the sense of meaning in life accounts for 12% of the variance with respect to sensitivity of conscience towards oneself and others (WSI) ( $R = 0.3464$ ), while all of them together account for 15% of the variance with respect to the dependent variable NB ( $R = 0.3856$ ) ( $F = 4.50$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In the group of people with a low (L) level of experience of God's absence, the variances of the dependent variable—sensitivity of conscience towards oneself and others (WSI)—are accounted for by the following variables relating to meaning in life: one's sense of meaning in life (SZ), affirmation of life (DZ), and attainment of life goals (CZ). The first independent variable (SZ) explains 11% of the dependent variance that in this case is sensitivity of conscience towards oneself and others (WSI) ( $R = 0.3312$ ), whereas all of them together explain 17% of the variance in respect of the dependent variable WSI ( $R = 0.4140$ ) ( $F = 3.85$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 2.** Independent variables relating to meaning in life: a sense of meaning in life (SZ), attainment of goals (CZ), and affirmation of life (DZ), explaining variance in respect of sensitivity of conscience towards oneself and others (WSI) in groups of students with a high (H) and a low (L) level of experience of God's absence. Results of multiple stepwise regression analysis.

Subject Groups	Independent Variables Explaining the Variance of Sensitivity of Conscience towards Oneself and Others (WSI)	<i>R</i>	<i>B</i>	Percentage of Explained Variance ( $R^2 \times 100\%$ )
H	SZ	0.3464	0.32	12
	CZ	0.3706	0.22	13
	DZ	0.3856	0.43	15
L	SZ	0.3312	0.51	11
	DZ	0.3864	0.32	15
	CZ	0.4140	0.21	17

### 3.3. Relation of Meaning of Life to Sensitivity of Conscience to Moral Values and Surroundings, for Students with a High and Low Level of Experience of God's Absence

Likewise, the same three independent variables relating to meaning in life—one's sense of meaning in life (SZ), attainment of life goals (CZ), and affirmation of life (DZ)—exhibit a significant relation to the dependent variable WSWM (*i.e.*, sensitivity to moral values and surroundings) in the groups of students with a high (H) level of experience of God's absence (Table 3). The first variable—a sense of meaning in life—explains 18% of the variance with respect to the abovementioned dependent variable ( $R = 0.4206$ ), whereas all of them together explain 23% of the variance ( $R = 0.4732$ ) ( $F = 3.19$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In the group of students with a low (L) level of experience of God's absence, the variances with respect to this same dependent variable are explained by the same variables: the sense of meaning in life (SZ), affirmation of life (DZ), and attainment of life goals (CZ). The first variable SZ explains 11% of the variance of the dependent variable WSWM ( $R = 0.3278$ ), while all of them together explain 12% of the variance of that same dependent variable ( $R = 0.3375$ ) ( $F = 2.70$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 3.** Independent variables relating to meaning in life: a sense of meaning in life (SZ), attainment of goals (CZ), and affirmation of life (DZ) explaining variance with respect to sensitivity of conscience to moral values and surroundings (WSWM) in groups of students with a high (H) or low (L) level of experience of God's absence. Results of multiple stepwise regression analysis.

Subject Groups	Independent Variables Explaining the Variance of Sensitivity of Conscience to Moral Values and the Surroundings (WSWM)	<i>R</i>	<i>B</i>	Percentage of Explained Variance ( $R^2 \times 100\%$ )
H	SZ	0.4206	0.18	18
	CZ	0.4384	0.32	19
	DZ	0.4732	0.48	23
L	SZ	0.3278	0.57	11
	DZ	0.3307	0.24	12
	CZ	0.3375	0.38	13

#### 4. Discussion

Our analysis of the relationship between meaning in life, sensitivity of conscience, and experience of God's absence has revealed a positive correlation between those aspects in the lives of students. Each variable is important, significant, and performs a specific function in the lives of students.

The first hypothesis, which posited the existence of a significant relation between meaning in life and sensitivity of conscience depending on the level of experience of God's absence, was confirmed in this analysis. Students characterized by a high level of religious experience of God's absence reveal a higher level of sense of meaning in life, of goal attainment, and of life affirmation than students with a low level of that experience. At the same time, student participants with a high level of experience of God's absence also exhibit greater sensitivity of conscience towards themselves and others than do students with a low level of such experiences. Indeed, given related research, a significant correlation between experience of God's absence and sensitivity of conscience was to be expected [31]. It should be noted that, in the current study, the two groups of students—those with a high level of experience of God's absence and those with a low level—exhibit equal sensitivity of conscience to moral values and surroundings. In accordance with Allport's [54] and Buksik's [56] conceptions, it was expected that students with a high level of experience of God's absence would also show greater sensitivity of conscience to moral values and surroundings—as has also been confirmed in related research [31]. These findings suggest that the religious experience of God's absence generates positive emotions such as life satisfaction, intensifies positive aspects of one's relationship to oneself, and promotes a heightened sense of there being meaning in one's life.

The second hypothesis was not fully supported. The evidence did not substantiate our claim that a sense of meaning in life might contribute significantly to explaining the variance of sensitivity of conscience in the group of students with a high level of experience of God's absence. A sense of meaning in life accounts for the same percentage (11%–12%) of variance in sensitivity of conscience both in the group with a high level of experience of God's absence and in the group with a low level of experience. As assumed by Buksik [56] and Popielski [66], a sense of meaning in life was expected, with its considerable involvement of the sphere of emotions and feelings, to be a strong predictor of sensitivity of conscience towards oneself and others in the lives of students with a high level of experience of God's absence. However, our findings suggest that the contribution of meaning in life—construed as a measure of one's affirmation of one's own life and one's attainment of one's life goals—to the process of shaping sensitivity of conscience, does not depend on the level of one's experience of God's absence. Instead, sensitivity of conscience is more dependent on life meaning as revealed in one's inner sense of satisfaction with life, and in a perceived lack of danger, rather than simply the sheer intensity of one's experience of divine absence.

The third hypothesis was fully confirmed by the findings of this study. This research revealed that goal attainment and life affirmation (construed as indicative of fulfillment of meaning in life) contribute to explaining variance of sensitivity of conscience to moral values and surroundings in the group of students having a high level of experience of God's absence.

What happens if we compare the contributions of goal attainment and life affirmation, treating both of these variables as predictors of variance with respect to sensitivity of conscience to moral values and surroundings? One should not fail to note that goal attainment and life affirmation exert twice as great

an influence on sensitivity of conscience to moral values and surroundings in the group with a high level of experience of God's absence, than in the group with a low level of experience. These findings suggest that a high level of intensity in one's experience of God's absence and the Divine's personal dimension, is coupled with whatever is being viewed as indicative of fulfillment of one's need for meaning in life. In effect, it counts as indicative of one's having attained one's goals and being in a position to actually affirm one's life. Thus, consistent with past research findings [31], experience of God's absence stands in a formative relation to sensitivity of conscience to moral values and surroundings, which in turn suggests that the extent of the role played by affirmation of one's own life and one's striving to attain life goals (construed as indicative of fulfillment of a need for meaning in life) depends on the level of one's experience of God's absence—at least when it comes to shaping sensitivity of conscience to values and surroundings. In brief, we may conclude that the stronger the experience of God's absence, the greater the contribution of personal affirmation and attainment of life goals to the process of shaping sensitivity of conscience. Experience of God's absence, as an important component of religiosity in young people, is clearly playing a significant formative role here in shaping sensitivity of conscience.

In this research, the sense of meaning in life (construed as a state of meaningfulness in life) proves to be the strongest predictor of variance for sensitivity of conscience. Meaning in life is strongly related to sensitivity of conscience towards oneself and others, and to sensitivity of conscience to moral values and surroundings, both in the group with a high level of experience of God's absence and the group with a low level of experience. These findings suggest the following: that a sense of meaning in life, such as reveals itself in one's satisfaction with life and one's not feeling lost, plays an important role in the lives of students, whether they have a high or low level of experience of God's absence. Of course, the sense of satisfaction with life and the feeling of not being lost are a measure of affirmation of one's own life and one's attainment of specific goals, but this is true independent of the level of one's experience of God's absence. We may conclude that perceived meaning in life contributes to shaping students' mature consciences on both an individual and a social level, as is revealed in their sensitivity of conscience (towards themselves and others, to moral values, and to their surroundings).

Let us now first compare the relative roles played by the sense of meaning in life (construed as capturing the state of there being meaning in one's life) and the attainment of goals and affirmation of one's own life (construed as indicative of a fulfillment of one's need for meaning in one's life) in helping to explain variance of sensitivity of conscience to moral values and surroundings. Here—and in line not only with theories based on the related research of Frankl [39] and Buksik [56], but also with our own working hypothesis—the variables together account for more of (*i.e.*, twice) the variance (in sensitivity of conscience to these things) in students with a high level of experience of God's absence than in those with a low level. Such findings suggest that the important role played by meaning in life (construed as above) in contributing to the development of sensitivity of conscience to these particular matters is one that itself depends on the level of one's experience of God's absence. To be sure, it is a fact that meaning in life, as a universal value, is independent of religious denomination. Nevertheless, our findings here show that the development of sensitivity of conscience to moral values and surroundings is supported and shaped by meaning in life to a greater extent in people with a high level of experience of God's absence than in those with a low level of this.

On the other hand, when it comes to explaining variance with respect to sensitivity of conscience towards oneself and others, we encounter a different scenario. In both the group with a high level of

experience of God's absence and the group with low experience, all three variables pertaining to meaning in life play an equally diminutive role in explaining the variance. For the sake of clarity, let us spell out once again that the three variables in question are the sense of meaning in life, understood as reflecting the state of there being meaning in one's life and one's inner satisfaction with life, one's attainment of personal goals, and affirmation of one's own life, where both of the latter are taken as indicative in turn of an actual fulfillment of one's need for meaning in life. In line with other research in this field—*i.e.*, Buksik [56] and Popielski [42]—it was expected that meaning in life would be a stronger predictor of variance of sensitivity of conscience towards meaning in life variables in the group of students with a high level of experience of God's absence, than in the group with a low level of experience. However, this research found that the role played by meaning in life (construed as above) in helping to shape sensitivity of conscience in these areas is actually a rather small one, and does not depend on the level of one's experience of God's absence. At the same time, it seems reasonable to suppose that there could be other personality traits that positively influence the process of conscience formation in young people. Frankl [40], for example, advocates responsibility as something that could play a prominent role in conscience formation, while Chlewinski [51] proposes the ease with which an individual manages to grasp both one's own and others' behavioral motivations.

## 5. Conclusions

There is a significant correlation between meaning in life, sensitivity of conscience, and the experience of God's absence. In spite of their correlations, each of these dimensions is autonomous in terms of its cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and evaluative aspects. Each of these play some role in helping to determine not just students' psychological and spiritual development (in both individual and social life), but also how individuals choose to act within and cope with their personal circumstances.

Our analysis permits us to assert now that the aspect of students' development we have been examining is also one that aspires to comprehensiveness. Experiencing God's absence has a self-discovery value. It provides new experiences, facilitating students' learning about their motives, needs, and aspirations. Such experiences also have a social aspect, in that they help students to orient themselves more towards others, to perfect their lives, and to understand other people's behavior.

It should be noted that the present study was conducted exclusively among young people engaged in university education and professing to belong to the Roman Catholic Church. The Christian religion adopts both the concept of God as a personified being and the notion that humans can achieve a personal relationship with God. Therefore, the analysis of the findings herein may only be directly relevant to religious interpretations falling within the scope of Christianity. However, this research may still serve as an inspiration for conducting more extensive research with participants who claim non-Christian religions, and those who are nonreligious.

The hypotheses that served as the starting point for this study can only be said to have received partial support. Many questions remain: concerning, for example, the relation of sensitivity of conscience to other—not yet studied—aspects of personality, the contribution of the religious experience of God's absence to the process of developing one's own religiosity, and the role of one's own active engagement in disclosing and achieving meaning in one's life.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Appendix

I need the experience of God's absence very much.

The experience of God's absence provides me with new knowledge about Him.

Each experience of God's absence makes me look at the world in a different way.

I think that each experience of God's absence leaves me with a sense of anxiety.

While I experience the absence of God in my life, I often have a feeling that God has left me.

I think that the experience of God's absence very often fills my life with feelings of loneliness.

When I experience God's absence, I can get to know myself better.

Experiencing God's absence motivates me to undertake more action.

The experience of God's absence enriches my life.

I think that it is easy to recognize God's absence in my life.

The experience of God's absence makes my trust in Him deeper.

While experiencing God's absence, I feel lost.

I do not think that my spiritual life would develop without the experience of God's absence.

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